

REAL HEROES

OF THE
OLD TESTAMENT



LORI DENNING

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FIRST THINGS

We all fail. That seems to be our common lot in life. We make mistakes. At times we don't understand. Or we rebel purposefully. We also have physical challenges, mental health hurdles, and the woes of a fallen world.

Despite all of that, there is good news. It is a message we have probably all heard but sometimes forget, or don't believe is for us. The good news is that Jesus has come! He has overcome this world—the hurts, the failings, even death. With Him, we will never fail.

And that is good news. With God, we will prevail.

This book is about real people like you and me. The Old Testament is full of their stories of when they found God. In the stories of their lives, we see real people with highs and lows. They have moments of faith. They show times when they are heroic and fantastic, obey the Lord, and see miracles happen. Their stories also tell of their failings. They have moments of doubt, make mistakes, and at times misunderstand.

God chooses people from all walks of life. They can be kings and prophets or shepherds and musicians. All of them make mistakes. At times, they can be the less fortunate, the marginalized, or the outcast. They are afraid, wrong, or sinful.

Scripture is great because it shares the stories of people when they are real. They are heroes despite their failings. They make mistakes, and God uses them anyway. The end of Genesis says it perfectly. After Joseph receives his coat of many colors, his brothers sell him into slavery, and he overcomes it to save them from famine. He tells his brothers, “Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people as he is doing today” (NRSV, Genesis 50:20). Despite our mistakes and our failings, God will preserve us as we turn to Him. We can become instruments in His hand.

These are the real heroes of the Old Testament.

The heroes are the people who fail, struggle, and are imperfect, and yet have the strength to return to God. The scriptures say it best. Let's hear a few more thoughts on it directly from them.

“And forgive Your people who have sinned against You and all their transgressions which they have transgressed against You, and make them objects of compassion before those who have taken them captive, that they may have compassion on them” (NRSV, 1 Kings 8:50).

“For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You” (NRSV, Psalm 86:5).

By following our Father and becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ, we can become heroes in our own lives. The good news is that through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we can overcome. As the modern house of Israel, we can tap into that power. Let God prevail.¹

READING SCRIPTURE

Scripture is dynamic. It is a way for God to tell the story of how He worked in the past and how He works today. Much of scripture is a story, a narrative. Those stories resonate with us across time and culture because they are stories. The prophets told stories rather than giving a checklist of instructions (granted, there are a few sections like that in scripture). Jesus taught in parables. The Book of Mormon recounts the rise and failure of an entire people. Starting with one family, we learn how they came to understand the Savior and His plan of salvation. The Old Testament is composed of great quantities of narratives. The power of stories is that their interpretation is fluid. The Spirit can use those stories to touch our hearts where we are—with what we need. Most scripture stories don’t end with a moral at the end, with everything neatly tied up in a bow. They invite us to ponder, pray, and experiment upon the word (see Alma 32). Rather than a tidy conclusion, scriptures invite us to see ourselves in the lives of others. We ponder, wrestle, and consider what it all means. We don’t nibble. We feast.

Scripture Cheat Sheet

There are two keys to the power of scripture stories. Stories can make us *feel*. The first key to unlocking these feelings is understanding their world. If we understand their circumstances, the time, and the culture in which they lived, we know them. We care about the people and what is happening in their lives. We may cheer for them and root for their victory. We may also fear the tyranny around them, afraid for the enemies that are on the rise. Their mistakes and sins make us cringe and worry, even feel anxiety for them. Biblical stories are about more than sharing data, history, and background. That first key is context. Context helps us feel what they were feeling, see what they saw, and live like they lived. Insights into the culture, history, language, and people can help us know what the events meant to those people, in their time, within their unique culture. The people of the Old Testament lived in a time unlike ours. How they lived, what they ate and wore, and how they treated each other was different from the twenty-first century. The events gain power and impact when we understand what was happening and what it meant to them.

The second key to scripture stories is how they affect us. They are about inviting us to respond, interact, and interpret what is going on. Scriptures aren’t just a history or a clever tale. They are invitations. They urge us to see ourselves in

the stories, people, and events. The impact, the power, is where *we let these stories in*. These stories can affect us. They can change us *if we let them*. Our responses help us make sense of the story. By allowing the characters—their hopes, dreams, fears, and mistakes—into our hearts, we draw the power of the scriptures into our own story. This key unlocks the power of the Savior in our lives. When we listen for the gospel of Jesus Christ in the pages, when we let Him change us, these stories become potent and real. In each page we can see the Lord as He guides, directs, and teaches us. We will hear Him.

In this book, we will try to do both. We will take a little time to try and understand the history, context, and language of the ancients to understand what they did and feel what they felt. More important, we are invited into the story. I invite you to jump in, see yourselves in these stories, and liken them to your own life. There is no one interpretation of a story—there is only what you see and what the Spirit invites you to see there. So, jump on in, try it on, and let the stories become your friends and family. Let these stories become your story.

A simple tool that will help us use these two keys is a clear translation. I will also use a translation that is a little easier to read for modern readers, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), or in some cases, my translation. I love the King James Version (KJV); it is the translation I grew up with. Its language is poetic, but it can be a little old-fashioned and requires clarifying. So, I'll just skip that part and use a translation that is more like our modern English. You can open your scriptures, turn on an app, and read the KJV and NRSV, and many other translations, side by side. I invite you to give it a try. It can really help explain the language and story. If I am ever unclear, look it up. "When in doubt, check it out." Don't let me be the expert, but let the scriptures speak to you in the way with which you're most comfortable.

Scripture is some of the strongest commentaries on itself. The New Testament comments and explores the Old Testament. The Book of Mormon prophets constantly look back to Old Testament prophets and stories and see their own lives reflected in it. Abraham and Moses both share insights in the Pearl of Great Price we do not have any other place. The Doctrine and Covenants and modern prophets have all discussed other scripture, its meaning, and its implication. This book takes the stories as they are. We may peek into other scripture, but for the most part we'll stick to the stories in their own place.

I'm going to give some interpretation and application. If you don't like my take, that's okay. I will probably change my mind occasionally as I learn new things. And that, my friend, is part of their power. The scriptures, not an interpretation (including this modest book), are the power. The scriptures, and their ability to invite the Holy Spirit, are the real key. Hopefully, this book will invite you to turn to the Book itself, to ask the Spirit into your life to give you meaning and insights. It is perfectly normal to ask a question, write notes to yourself, and stump your Sunday School teacher. I believe doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are perfect, and scriptures hold eternal truths. I also believe we

are to apply them. Thus, scripture application isn't always about "the" answer. It is about an answer you need right now. That's how it is supposed to work. So, jump on in, and find out what these stories of the Old Testament are all about.

There is one more bonus key to understanding scripture. We can turn to the Lord and ask for the Holy Spirit. Book of Mormon prophet Nephi encouraged us to turn to the Spirit of the Lord for insights. When scripture gets tricky or unclear, we can remember's Nephi words: "The mysteries of God . . . unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (1 Nephi 10:19). Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve said, "Each pronouncement in the holy scriptures . . . is so written as to reveal little or much, depending on the spiritual capacity of the student."²

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1. A note on scriptural interpretation. Growing up, I thought that scriptures had "a" singular interpretation. My job was to find out what it was. Or I could "cheat" and find a conference talk and see what a prophet or apostle said it meant. It wasn't a terrible idea. It had some merit. If a General Authority told me what it meant, I could feel confident that it was correct. That is still correct today. However, I didn't understand how scripture works.
 2. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1985), 71.

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