

Question:

When reading the Bible, we often come across the phrase “*the Law and the Prophets*.” What exactly does this expression mean? For example, Jesus says in:

Matthew 7:12 (NIV):

“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

Answer:

When Jesus refers to “*the Law and the Prophets*,” He is using a common Jewish phrase that summarizes the **entire Hebrew Bible**, known today

as the **Old Testament**. This phrase broadly categorizes the Scriptures into two major sections:

1. The Law (Torah):

This refers to the **first five books of the Bible**, also called the **Pentateuch** or **Books of Moses**:

- **Genesis**
- **Exodus**
- **Leviticus**
- **Numbers**
- **Deuteronomy**

These books contain the historical narrative of creation, the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), the Exodus from Egypt, and the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. They are foundational to understanding God’s covenant with Israel.

2. The Prophets (Nevi'im):

This includes both the **Former Prophets** (like Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the **Latter Prophets** (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets Hosea through Malachi). These books contain historical records, divine warnings, promises, messianic prophecies, and calls to repentance and justice.

Additionally, Jesus and the Jews of His time often grouped **the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ruth, and other writings** under a third category called the **Writings (Ketuvim)** though sometimes these were also included under “the Prophets” in casual reference.

Theological Significance:

When Jesus said, *“this sums up the Law and the Prophets,”* He was declaring that **the entire Old Testament** can be summarized by the

principle of **love** especially the love that acts toward others with justice, mercy, and compassion.

This aligns with another of Jesus’ key teachings:

Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV):

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’
This is the first and greatest commandment.
And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’
All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Here, Jesus distills the entire moral and spiritual thrust of the Old Testament into two commandments: **Love God** and **Love your neighbor**. These are not new ideas; they are rooted in the Torah itself (see *Deuteronomy 6:5* and *Leviticus 19:18*).

Application for Believers Today:

Even as New Covenant believers, this principle of love remains the

foundation of our faith. The Apostle Paul reinforces this in his teaching:

Romans 13:10 (NIV):

“Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (NIV):

1. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.
2. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.
3. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Paul emphasizes that no matter how gifted or sacrificial we may be, **without love, we are spiritually empty.**

What Does “The Law and the Prophets” Mean?

Shalom.

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