

“Every Scripture” and the task of Preaching

Introduction

Last week, we concluded our journey through the book of Exodus. And so, now, naturally the question arises: What next? Maybe more specifically, what do we *need* after Exodus?

Last week, I said something I hadn’t planned on saying, and hadn’t written down in my notes. Later, a brother asked me for clarification, and I realized it might be helpful if I clarified for everyone. So this is what I said (and here I’m quoting myself word for word):

“I have come on the journey [through Exodus] with you. For myself, I know that this book of Exodus, in all of its connections with the rest of Scripture and ultimately fulfilled in Christ, this book of Exodus has been all that I have needed for my spiritual life. It has been all that I have needed for the spiritual sustenance of my life from day to day and the living out of my life as a Christian. To *God* be the glory. And though I have failed, it has always been of me, and not any lack in God’s Word.”

But isn’t *all* of God’s Word essential? What do I mean by this?

I. The ultimate goal of every Scripture is always the same

Most importantly, I want to emphasize that I didn’t say that the book of Exodus was all I needed all by itself, in *isolation* from the rest of Scripture – as though we could just have Exodus without any of the rest of the Bible. But what about Exodus, as I said, “in all of its connections with the rest of Scripture and ultimately fulfilled in Christ.” Should that be sufficient for our spiritual sustenance from day to day and the living out of our lives as Christians? This is a question that I believe we all need to wrestle with.

As we journeyed through Exodus, we read it **in the context of the whole Bible**, from beginning to end – from Genesis to Revelation. We’ve been constantly exhorted to worship, to humility, to the love of God and our neighbor, we’ve been exhorted to trust and believe, to rejoice, and to hope, we’ve been warned against unbelief and idolatry, and every manner of sin. And we’ve been exhorted and warned in all of these areas always in full view of the fulfillment of Exodus in Christ. In the end, what we need to see is that when we’re reading the Scriptures rightly, what we get in Exodus is ultimately the **same thing** that we get everywhere else we go in Scripture. Now, at first, we may think that disappointing. Or maybe we’re skeptical that this is even true. Listen to what Jesus said to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection:

- Luke 24:25–27 — And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And **beginning with Moses and all the Prophets**, he interpreted to them **in all the Scriptures** the things concerning himself.”

What Jesus says is that the work and the goal of every part of Scripture (“all the Scriptures”) is to point us to the **revelation of God in Christ Jesus**. Earlier, Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews:

- John 5:45–47 — “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?”

No matter where I will ever preach from in the Bible, I know that the *ultimate* point will always be the same. Every passage of Scripture, in every book of the Bible, ultimately does the same thing – it testifies to the character and the glory of God now revealed to us in Jesus Christ. But it’s always tempting for us to want “more.” Surely, once I’ve heard the same basic message enough times, then it’s time for something new? We are conditioned to this way of thinking. So even if I don’t think that’s me, I would venture to say that it *is* me – to some extent or another. But it was just this way of thinking that caused Paul to write in Colossians chapter two:

- Colossians 2:1–5 — For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

There were people in the church at Colossae arguing that there was something more – something beyond Christ, or in addition to Christ. And so, in response, Paul sets forth Christ as the one “in whom are hidden **all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” And it’s **this “all”** that explains our need to “reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ.” You see, Paul is warning the Colossian Christians against the dangerous lie that they could ever need something additional—something more—and points them to all the riches that they have already been given in Christ. “This,” he says, “is all that you could ever need.” So, when we read and study Exodus **in the light of its connections with the rest of Scripture and in the light of its fulfillment in Christ**, can you see how this is all that any Christian ever needs?—Because this is ultimately the same thing that all of the rest of Scripture is always doing. But this, then, leads us to the second main point:

II. Every Scripture, rightly interpreted, is equally relevant to the life of the Christian

We may ask ourselves: But aren’t there more practical books than Exodus – books that are *more* relevant to my life? And I would suggest that the answer is “no.” I would suggest that there is no book *more* practical or *more* relevant to your life than the book of Exodus read and studied and interpreted in the light of the rest of Scripture, and ultimately in the light of Christ. Many of us are probably familiar with the famous verses in 2 Timothy, where Paul writes:

- 2 Timothy 3:16–17 — **All** Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Timothy already knows that all Scripture is breathed out by God, so this isn't Paul's main point. Paul's main point is that **since** all Scripture is breathed out by God, **therefore** all Scripture is profitable, useful, practical, and relevant for all the things that Paul goes on to mention. In other words, the relevance of Scripture is never determined by how relevant it feels to us, but rather by the awesome reality that it is, all of it, breathed out by God. *If* it is breathed out by God, *then* it must be relevant, practical, and useful.

And what are the Scriptures to which Paul is referring? Certainly, they would have come to include all the writings of the New Testament. But what Paul is specifically referring to here are the Old Testament Scriptures. "All [Old Testament] Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable, useful, practical and relevant for the Christian," Paul says. There are some who suggest that "All" [Old Testament] Scripture should actually be translated "every" or "each" [Old Testament] Scripture. I lean toward this translation, but even if "all" is better, the point is still the same. Paul is saying that each individual passage and text in the Old Testament—every single one—is useful and relevant to the day to day living of the Christian precisely **because** each individual passage and text in the Old Testament—every single one—is breathed out by God. (Towner)

Really? Can this REALLY be true? Now, very often, I can have a presupposed idea in my mind as to what exactly qualifies a passage of Scripture as "relevant" to the day to day living of my life. And very often, my criteria for "relevance" will exclude many of the Scriptures that we find in Exodus – and, in fact, in much of the Bible. But this only reveals that our definition of what is "relevant" must be faulty. While many of us may have been familiar with 2 Timothy 3:16-17, we may not know right away what are the verses that come right before it.

➤ 2 Timothy 3:14–17 — But as for you, [Timothy,] continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings [the Old Testament Scriptures], which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable...

For Paul, the relevancy of the Old Testament Scriptures are to be found in their ability to make one wise for salvation **through faith in Christ Jesus**. And this ability to make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus applies across the board to each and every single, individual text of the Old Testament Scriptures – breathed out, as they are, by God, and interpreted, as they are meant to be, in the light of Christ.

So, now, let me return to what I said last week:

"I know that this book of Exodus, in all of its connections with the rest of Scripture and ultimately fulfilled in Christ, this book of Exodus has been all that I have needed for my spiritual life. It has been all that I have needed for the spiritual sustenance of my life from day to day and the living out of my life as a Christian."

The real reason I can say this is because there is a sense in which it matters not which book of the Bible we're in, or for how long, since every individual passage of Scripture is always

ultimately doing precisely the same thing – revealing to us the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in Christ, and making us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. In other words, rather than saying, “I’m preaching the book of Exodus,” perhaps it would be more accurate to say, “This week, I’ll be preaching *Scripture*.” And all Scripture is relevant to my day to day living precisely because each and every single passage of Scripture is breathed out by God, and faithfully reveals the glory of God in the Gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ. I believe that one of the ultimate tests of the relevancy of any sermon is whether it can easily, and beautifully, and seamlessly transition into the Lord’s Supper as its most natural and fitting conclusion.

III. What “every Scripture” means for the task of preaching (and the task of listening to preaching)

So, how have these passages from Luke, and Colossians, and 2 Timothy impacted my approach to the wonderful task of preaching God’s word? Why do I preach the way I preach – or, using the method that I do? Now, I want to say right now that using the right method doesn’t mean I’m doing a good job. This isn’t a defense of how well I’m doing, but only an explanation of why I approach the task of preaching the way I do. In light of these passages from Luke, and Colossians, and 2 Timothy, I’m committed (overall) to a systematic, expositional method in preaching. That might sound fancy, but it’s really very simple.

IV. Preaching the Scripture Expositionally

We’ve seen that every passage of Scripture is relevant to our day to day living **because** each and every single one is breathed out by God, and faithfully reveals the glory of God in the Gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ. But **how** do the Scriptures do this? And the answer is, in a whole myriad of different ways. What this means is that the only way to faithfully see the glory of God in the Gospel of His Son in “every Scripture” is by carefully *studying* and then *explaining the meaning* of that passage both in its immediate, original context, and also in the larger context of the entire Bible. *That’s* expositional preaching.

In some of the modern obsession with finding Christ in every passage of Scripture, we’ve either become fanciful, or else way too simplistic, so that basically, the “application” of every passage is “Jesus” as hardly more than a stereotyped “Sunday School answer.” But, in fact, the application *is* always to be “Jesus” – *as the one* “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” And so we see that the nature of Scripture as that which is breathed out by God in every single part, and that which reveals God’s glory in Christ in every single part, actually *requires* that the vast majority of preaching must be *expositional* preaching.

“Expositional preaching is the explanation of Scripture that is based upon diligent study and careful exegesis of a passage... The word *exposition* is related to the word *expose* — the expository preacher’s goal is simply to expose the meaning of the Bible, verse by verse... G. Campbell Morgan, pastor of London’s Westminster Chapel and known as ‘the prince of expositors,’ taught that a sermon is limited by the text it is covering... He wrote, ‘The sermon is the text repeated more fully.’ A sermon’s primary function is to present the text. An expositor cares little if his audience says, ‘What a great sermon’ or

‘What an entertaining speaker.’ What he truly wants them to say is, ‘Now I know what that passage means,’ [and, therefore] ‘[now] I better understand who God is and what He requires of me [the one *necessarily* leads to the other].’” (gotquestions.org)

So, what is expositional preaching? It’s preaching that *explains* the *meaning* of the text. An expository sermon *is the text* repeated more fully. Today, I’m convinced that what the church *especially* needs is expositional preaching through Old Testament books like Genesis and Exodus. Why? Because these are the books that many Christians may be the most tempted to neglect. And, also, because the New Testament itself is so deeply and thoroughly rooted in the Old Testament. The better you understand the Old Testament, the more rich will be your reading of the new.

V. Preaching the Scripture Systematically (in context)

There’s something else that all expository preaching is, and that’s systematic. In other words, we progress systematically, in order, through every *individual* passage of any given book. Why do we do this?

We believe that every single passage of Scripture is breathed out by God, and therefore every single passage of Scripture is profitable and useful for the Christian as it makes us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. To regularly pick and choose the passages that we will preach can easily betray a lack of confidence that every single passage of Scripture *really is* all that God has said it is.

Preaching topically can sometimes be important if there’s a specific issue that needs to be addressed in the Church. So, in light of a Supreme Court ruling a couple of years ago, I felt it important to preach a series of messages on the topic of homosexuality. Over the years, I’ve also felt it important to preach some topical messages on prayer in order to encourage a greater participation in our prayer meetings. I’ve preached a series of topical messages on evangelism. And today, I’m preaching a topical sermon on preaching. But overall, unless there is some unique, or pressing reason, I do avoid topical messages.

As a general rule, topical messages will never allow us to see the true meaning and beauty of Scripture in the context in which God Himself has placed it. In other words, the fact that God Himself has carefully tied each individual passage of Scripture together with its own immediate and larger context (historical, grammatical, and theological) means that the only way to understand the full meaning and beauty of any given passage is in the full light of all this context. As an example, it would have been impossible to fully understand the rich meaning of Exodus chapter 40 without having first preached the first 39 chapters of the book of Exodus. Indeed, if God had wanted us to preach topically on any kind of a regular basis, I believe He would have organized the Scriptures topically. But any reading of the Scriptures will show us just how far from the reality this is.

If God Himself is the one who has chosen to breath out the Scriptures in specific historical, grammatical, and theological contexts, then why is it that the sermons we very often find most “applicable,” and “helpful,” and “relevant” are topical sermons in which it is *impossible* to fully

explain the meaning of a passage or discern its beauty in the context that God gave it? I think there may be a couple of reasons. It is possible to confuse “relevant,” and “useful” with “easy” to listen to, and perhaps even “entertaining.” More likely, though, we confuse “relevant,” and “useful” with an unintentional self-centeredness that asks questions like these: “What do *I* want? What do *I* need? How can *I* be a better Christian? But always underlying any of this is the reality that many Christians have been conditioned to think of Christianity in a light in which the Bible never places it. I believe that many Christians are in bondage to the idea that a growing Christian life is about always learning something new – a new teaching, a new principle, a new application – or making some significant, new change in one’s life. But while these things may certainly happen from time to time, the real essence of the Christian life is the gradual transformation of our lives **from the inside out** – in other words, being transformed into the image of the Lord from one degree of glory to another as we all, with unveiled faces, *behold* the glory of God *in the face of Jesus Christ*. (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6) And where do we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ?—Equally, in every single passage of Scripture, carefully read and understood in light of the full context in which it was placed by God.

Conclusion

I want to speak to you, now, just from my heart. I live the same life that you live. I face the same basic struggles and temptations that you do from day to day. I live with the reality of the same exact sin nature that you all live with every single day. I’m striving for the same goal of Christlikeness that all of you are striving for. I am not different from you. But for this daily struggle against my sin, and for this daily striving to be made like Christ, I have found the book of Exodus to be abundantly sufficient—*and more*—for all that I need. Not only do I believe that God Himself has told me that it *would* be, but I have found this to be true *experientially* – week after week after week after week. And this is what I want and desire for each one of you. No, the book of Exodus hasn’t given me something new to think about each week – a new lesson to work on applying each week. But the book of Exodus *has* made me wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. **This it has done as well as any other book in the Bible could ever do.**

So then, why do I spend so much time reading each day from so many other places in the Bible? I suppose you could say the answer is so that I’ll always be able to read Exodus (and every other book of the Bible) faithfully, in the light of all its connections with the rest of Scripture, and ultimately in the light of its fulfillment in Christ. While on the one hand we may be in need of correction, and perhaps even rebuke for our often self-centered approach to the Scriptures, I think what we’re probably most in need of is encouragement and reassurance. Exodus *is* enough. Don’t fret. Don’t worry. There’s no need for us to be anxiously waiting for whatever else it is that we might think we really need. And once we’ve stopped fretting and worrying, or simply waiting, I wonder if this might free us more to do the work week after week of rightly interpreting, and truly understanding the Scriptures.

We may not all be a people of books, but we *are* all a people of “**the book**.” I wouldn’t dare to think that any of you would want to listen to a careful explanation of any other text week after week after week. But, of course, this text—this book—is different. This book is God’s Word – all of it, equally, from beginning to end. And, so, we’re *all* called to approach the study of this

text with more care, with more diligence, with more self-abasement, and with more joy than any other in all the world.

I said earlier that using the “right” method of preaching doesn’t mean I’m doing a good job. Apart from my constant struggle with the sinful, prideful fear of not being thought well of by others (by you), my greatest fear every week is that I will not explain *clearly* the *meaning* of God’s Word, and that I will obscure in some way its full power and beauty. But *if*, by God’s grace, I *could* explain Exodus accurately and clearly, always showing how it makes us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus— *if* I could do this, then I will say this to you: The book of Exodus is abundantly sufficient for the spiritual sustenance of your life from day to day and the living out of your life as a Christian. And though *we* may fail, this will always be of us, and never from any lack in the word that God has breathed out in Exodus.

I’ve said that the book of Exodus is abundantly sufficient, but of course, we’re also completely dependent on the indwelling Holy Spirit, whom God has given to *all* who have put their faith in Christ. Jesus said to His disciples:

- John 14:15–17 — “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

My *only* confidence in preaching to God’s chosen and holy people week after week is that each one of you *has* been given *this* Spirit of God. And, so, I know that as you’re exposed to the true **meaning** of God’s word—to its truth and beauty—the Spirit *will* be faithful to work in you from day to day – convicting you of sin, comforting you, filling you with hope, helping you to pray aright, and leading you always in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. (cf. Jn. 16:7-8; Acts 9:31; Rom. 8:15-17; Rom. 8:26-27; Gal. 5:16-25; Ps. 23:3) Indeed, as Jesus says in John chapter 15, the work of the Holy Spirit who indwells us is always, ultimately, to bear witness about **Jesus** – and this I have complete confidence that He will be faithful to do. (Jn. 15:26; cf. 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Jn. 5:6-9)