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Preaching Christ from the Old Testament

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Preaching Christ from the Old Testament is hard. It's hard because the Old Testament text itself can be hard to deal with—it's long, complicated, and culturally distant. It's hard because even when we get to grips with the text, it isn't always easy to see how it relates to Jesus and/or how we can encourage people with the gospel, rather than simply making them feel guilty and weighed down with impossible requirements.

It's hard because, even when we have a robust biblical theology, it isn't always easy to see how individual parts of the text fit into the flow of our biblical theology. If we're not careful, our Old Testament preaching can be reduced to a weekly trawl from Genesis 3 to Revelation (which, I have to say, gets terribly predictable and boring after the first two weeks!) So what can we do?

I think we need to begin with two key principles:

- The text already preaches the gospel, so let the text launch you towards Jesus!
- The trajectory to Jesus and the new covenant should be suggested by the

text!

There is, of course, a variety of opinion as to what exactly Jesus meant when he said in Luke 24 that all the Scriptures point to him. But whether we follow the 'stronger' interpretation ('one can legitimately preach Christ from every part of the Bible') or the 'weaker' one ('the heart of the message of the Old Testament is the coming of Christ, but there is lots of other material which is theocentric rather than christocentric'), few would dispute that the Old Testament preaches the gospel. That is, the Old Testament makes clear that we are desperately sinful people whose only hope is God himself providing a rescuer to deal with sin and death. If that's the case, then it is reasonable to assume that the text itself will sooner or later launch us towards Jesus.

If we can rely on the text to do this (although we need to remember it might take a while for the launch sequence to reach its conclusion), then surely it also makes sense to allow the text itself to suggest the trajectory we follow to 'get to' Jesus and the new covenant, and so suggest ways in which we might legitimately preach the gospel from the Old Testament which are faithful to the Bible as a whole. Of course, in some cases, the text might suggest several trajectories which take us unfailingly to Christ; in others, we may be able to see only one sure path. But identifying these 'pathways' is, I believe, a real help in preaching Christ from the Old Testament in a way which is controlled by and prompted by the text itself.

If these pathways are to be of any use to those of us who teach the Bible regularly, then they need to be clear, simple, and immediately obvious both to us and to everyone else in church. The nine basic (and distinct) pathways that follow are neither definitive nor exhaustive, and some overlap. But taken together, these pathways suggest a variety of ways in which we can preach Christ, and, if used thoughtfully, can ensure that our Old Testament preaching is both gospel-driven and fresh from week to week.

1. Follow the plan

From almost any point in the Old Testament (and particularly from any point in a narrative section), it is possible to simply follow God's unfolding master plan through to its conclusion in Christ. This is a valid and important way of preaching the Old Testament, but like any approach, it becomes boring and predictable, and when overused loses its power. This way of preaching from the Old Testament is most natural and effective when there is some kind of *forward momentum* in the text itself. So, for example, when preaching Ruth 4, which traces Ruth's descendants as far as King David, or in the story of Jehosheba in 2 Kings 11 where the same royal line is nearly wiped out, continuing to follow the unfolding plan to its fulfilment in the Lord Jesus Christ is a perfectly natural way to frame the passage.

2. Trace the fulfilment

Rather than focusing on the way in which the plan unfolds, one can also move straight from the Old Testament to Christ, where the perfect rescuing King is promised. This is the equivalent of flying rather than driving the scenic route! So, for example, if we are looking at the laws of Deuteronomy 17 relating to the king, or the description of the suffering of the servant in Isaiah 53, or Daniel's vision of the Son of Man in chapter 7, there is no need to 'touch down' at multiple points *en route* to its fulfilment in Jesus. We can just go straight there!

3. Expose the problem

In many Old Testament texts (where there may be no explicit mention of God's rescuer, or even of any plan to send one), the dominant note is the sinfulness of human beings like us (whether seen through the prism of individuals or God's people or other nations). It is perfectly legitimate to describe the problem which the text highlights, and then explain how Jesus is God's solution to the problem. This is a powerful way of approaching many different Old Testament texts. So, for example, the spotlight may fall on the inadequacy of the people God chooses to use (whether the proud and stubborn Moses in Exodus 6, or the licentious Samson in Judges 13-16), or the fickleness of God's people (in, say, Exodus 32), or their downright wickedness (take Judges 21, for example). In each case, it would be helpful to expose the nature of the problem—inadequate leaders, our inconsistency, our depravity—and show how God tackled these fundamental problems arising from human sinfulness in Jesus' death and resurrection. The end result is that the sermon takes on a problem-solution form, which sounds and feels different from either the unfolding plan or the direct fulfilment form, which can only be a good thing.

4. Highlight the (divine) attribute

One of the challenges of preaching Old Testament sermons is that long sections of the narrative and prophetic books are devoted to the wanton stupidity of God's people. But 'exposing the problem' can become just as tired as 'following the plan'. So we do need to vary our approach from the problem-solution pathway just described. One legitimate way of doing this is shifting the spotlight from how we mess up to *how God responds*. In other words, to talk a little less about the problems we create, and more about the God who is both willing and able to handle them! So, for example, in Exodus 32-34, it's not too hard to construct one talk focusing on the mess the people make, and then another around the fact that God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. This then paves the way for pointing out how this aspect of God's character is seen even more clearly in the gospel. Similarly, in Judges 13-16, it would be very easy to emphasize God's patience and grace with his

people, even when they didn't really care about character issues.

I hope it is becoming clear that in many cases, this is simply a matter of subtly shifting emphasis to ensure that our approach is fresh. It is a great thing when we manage to surprise people with what is in the text. When working through longer sections of the Old Testament, we need to be ready to shift the focus to stop people getting bored.

5. Focus on the action

Another option that often presents itself is to focus, not this time on the attribute of God, but on what he actually *does*. This is not substantially different from highlighting an aspect of God's character, but it is a distinct approach.

So, for example, in the story of the plagues in Exodus 7-11, one could explain the fact that God is all-powerful, or focus on how God defeats the powers of evil. Similarly, in the David and Goliath incident in 1 Samuel 17, I think the most natural way to deal with the text is to concentrate on the way in which God chooses to take on his enemies, which he then does in an even more obvious and decisive way on the cross (see [Colossians 2:15](#)).

I think it is also perfectly legitimate (and at times, helpful) to focus on what one or more of the human actors does in the narrative, and show how Jesus does this on a grander, more effective scale in the New Testament. So when, for example, Boaz shows such tenderness and kindness to Ruth in Ruth 2-3, it is the kind of thing that Jesus does repeatedly in the gospel narratives. This is not to say that the writer consciously intended to prepare the way for Jesus in this text, but that from our perspective, this side of the cross, similarities are clearly visible. The idea that people in the Old Testament at their best *can act on occasion like Jesus* whilst still being sinful (and often making that very obvious soon after) is very useful in preaching the Old Testament text.

6. Explain the category

The sixth distinct way of moving from the Old Testament text to the message of the gospel is to focus not on the action, or on what the passage shows us about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (which is then more fully revealed in the gospel), but rather to build the talk around a key category. So, for example, when preaching on Genesis 22, rather than focusing on the promises made to Abraham, or how Isaac's survival was crucial to God's unfolding plan, one might spend most time on the whole idea of substitution, which is introduced and explained by this and a range of other key Old Testament texts. When preaching on Deuteronomy 20, the justice of God might be the focus, and when looking at Hosea 1-2 God's faithfulness could take

centrestage. This is a more thematic approach, but is (a) firmly anchored in the text itself, (b) controlled by the text, and (c) intended to shed light on the text, rather than to launch out into unrelated areas.

7. Point out the consequences

Sometimes, in Old Testament narrative in particular, it is helpful to concentrate on the consequences of choosing obedience or disobedience within the story itself. Almost the entire Old Testament canon operates within a framework of blessing and curse, established most clearly in Deuteronomy 27-30, and picked up powerfully in the New Testament. Paul's 'second Adam' section in 1 Corinthians 15 is one example of these two ways to live. This is a powerful way of explaining, for example, the aftermath of the Bathsheba incident in 2 Samuel 12, or Joshua 7. It can also be extremely powerful in looking at the wisdom literature.

8. Describe the ideal human character

Some of the most difficult passages to handle in a way which does justice to the sweep of biblical theology are those which set out what it means to be godly. So to avoid sounding legalistic we often neglect such passages as Psalm 1 or Proverbs 3 (and much of the wisdom literature), or [Micah 6:8](#) and other prophetic passages calling us to act justly. The challenge is to find a way to teach these passages which neither loses their impact nor rips them out of their biblical-theological context. How do we do that? One possibility is simply to describe the character of the godly man or woman which God is working to produce. This is basically Christ-likeness, and is an anticipation of what all God's people will be like in the new creation. We get these eschatological snapshots all through the Old Testament, in the teaching of Jesus (particularly in the Sermon on the Mount), and on through the New Testament. When we recognize that these are the very traits that the work of Jesus produces in his people, it ensures that even on these passages our teaching is gospel-filled and gospel-driven.

9. Satisfy the longing

There are passages in the Old Testament which are charged with pain, disappointment, and a longing for God to act (I would argue that the prayers of both Nehemiah 13 and Daniel 9 fall into this category, as do many of the Psalms). These are examples of Old Covenant believers longing for the New Covenant, irrespective of how this is articulated.

And finally...

These nine pathways (and if you can identify others, please tell me!) are a real help in writing gospel-centred talks on Old Testament passages. The next time you teach a series on an Old Testament book, sit down and divide it into appropriately sized chunks. Jot down what you think the big idea of each section is. Then note what you think might be the most effective and faithful way of moving from the text to the gospel. That's when this way of thinking comes into its own—make sure that you aren't using the same well-trodden path every week. Then, hopefully, people will be surprised, encouraged, pointed to Jesus and made to gasp at the gospel, rather than just bored.

However, it's important to remember that they are just 'scaffolding'—something that's useful in construction, but should never be left in place once the work is done. They are designed to help us make sure that we don't get stuck in a particular biblical-theological rut, and to suggest ways of preaching the text which flow out of the text itself, rather than being imposed from elsewhere. They are not supposed to be watertight theological categories, but fairly elastic reminders of the way in which biblical theology works and prompts us to fresh thinking.

It's also important to remember that when we have put any part of the Old Testament in its biblical-theological context, we haven't finished the sermon. In a very real sense, we have only started. The goal of any Old Testament sermon is not to show how this passage relates to Christ. It is to preach the gospel. When we have worked out *how* we might do that, we are ready to begin the exciting and challenging job of preaching the text in a way which makes people gasp at our God and throw themselves into living for him!

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