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Preaching & Teaching OT & NT Biblical Biographies: The Importance, Theology, Principles, and Practicality **The Word of God across Human History: It's A Biographical Story**

It is not without significance that so large a proportion of the Bible is devoted to biography. The Scriptures are inspired by God. He has therefore given biographies in the form in which we find them so that we can learn spiritual lessons, life lessons, from the failures and successes of real men and women. As a matter of fact, many Christians learn much more from the study of people than from the study of theological doctrines.¹ As Chuck Swindoll points out,

¹ The Bible, our source for our preaching, as God's divine revelation to us—our ultimate source of truth—is not simply a doctrinal sourcebook, it is a biographical sourcebook for us; it reveals characters and families from Genesis to Revelation. It is biographical. Much of our preaching – and our illustrations in our preaching – is based upon or centered on individuals or the family unit. We have found that the image/metaphor of “family” – and a host of related household expressions (i.e., father, brother, sister, steward, etc.) – occurs from Genesis to Revelation.

Have you ever asked yourself why God made human beings to live together in families – male and female, young and old all under the same roof? The physical family first appears in Scripture as God's provision for human companionship and generation. From Gen 2 we learned that the family was designed by God, and initially consisted of man & wife. But before the first family even had an opportunity to grow, before children were even born to the first family, the couple fell into sin: introduced death, disruption, discord (as a result, families would now experience widowhood, strife, conflict, difficulties) – the human saga. Interesting, the rest of Genesis is about families (brothers Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Lot and his family, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, etc.).

“One cannot read the book of Genesis without a depressing awareness of what a deeply flawed institution the family is in a fallen world. The family stories in Genesis are stories of squabbling spouses, sibling rivals, and deceitful children who have a tendency to thwart their parent's dreams for them. . . . Yet a final image of the family in Genesis provides a message of hope. . . . From the beginning, then, Scripture establishes the family as the social unit into which God put human beings and the channel through which He deals with them. The family is an inherently ambivalent image of disappointment and struggle on the one hand, and of hope on the blessing on the other.” (from the *Dict. of Bib Imagery*, 265)

The family motif is carried through the OT and the entire NT: we are called “sons of God”, great theological truths such as “born again”, “adoption”, “bride of Christ”, etc. are all family terms; the writers of the epistles refer to their fellow believers as “brothers” and “sisters” in the Lord more than a hundred times. This tells me that the Bible is the story about God's

Scriptural character studies never fail to encourage us in our pilgrimage. That is one of the reasons God included snapshots of so many people in His Book. He wants us to see truth reflected in all these lives—even in the most obscure and unfamiliar individuals. This is all part of the Lord’s plan. Our faithful Heavenly Father has preserved each life in still portraits for our examination. Study each one carefully. Don’t be afraid to compare. . . God’s Word is a timeless mirror that gives us a true reflection of what pleases Him and what grieves Him.²

In the forward to his book *The Greatest Men of the Bible*, Clarence E. Macartney, one of America’s great preachers of a past generation, had this to say: “Early in my first pastorate, at the First Presbyterian Church, Paterson, New Jersey, I made the important homiletic discovery that the people like to hear sermons on Bible characters, and that the preacher can preach on Bible characters more naturally, fluently, and practically than on any other subject.”

Chuck Swindoll, well known for his preaching biblical characters, in an interview was asked, “Several of your books have originated in sermon series on biblical characters. What drew you toward biographical preaching?” he responded:

I think there’s nothing like a biography to incarnate the truth. You can talk about faith until you are blue in the face. . . . There’s something about putting it into a life that translates theory into reality.

Then he was asked to elaborate: “As you do biographical preaching, what are some of the strengths you see in communicating biblical truth that way?” He answered:

[First] I think the preacher is always looking for ways to help people realize how relevant the scriptures are. I would like to underscore how I said that, lest you think I’m saying it’s our job to make the Bible relevant. It *is* relevant. The preacher’s task is to help people see . . . how in touch this book really is with life.

Second, I believe it breaks life down into believable chunks. People in the Bible go through experiences. They go through, amazingly, some of the very same things we go through today. Change the names, change the places, change the date, and you’ve got something that’s happening last night or today or tomorrow. When that happens, I believe it is so much less complicated to then turn to an application because the people have seen themselves on the page. Something wonderful happens when that occurs. I’m not listening to something that is dated back to the first century or even a thousand years before the first century, I’m listening to how my life is today – it just happens to be in another setting.

Third, you’re also teaching biblical content. That’s one of the benefits. So much preaching today does everything to draw people to a story or to some situation that a preacher

family from beginning to end. God made families in the first place partly as a biological and social basis for the human race and partly as the channel of His grace and judgement. Therefore, God has chosen to communicate and propagate truth through the concept of “family” – it is one of the most important metaphors/images (among others) He has chosen as a means for us to understand His overall plan. Thus, the concept of “household”, “stewardship”, “adoption”, etc. are expressions used in God’s revelation to us to convey profound spiritual truths. Indeed, they occur in biographical/familial settings/passages (contexts).

² Chuck Swindoll, “Introduction” in *Old Testament Characters: Bible Study Guide*, 1986.

may imagine and then it goes into a moral of it and applies it and you go on. . . . Oh, I think some of the dangers are the same dangers as you've had in any other kind of preaching, like reading into it something that's not there – you've got to be careful to do exegesis, not eisegesis. I think also if you're not careful, and you do a biblical character and you stay on that character so long, it's easy to take that character out of context and make him stand on his own. I think every character has a setting. And the better you know the setting and communicate the setting, the more accurate you will be with dealing with his character.³

Purpose of this study: As we look at the lives of the characters across the pages of Scripture who appear in God's grand story, there are several lessons we need to observe.

Beware of thinking that biographical preaching is not expository preaching.

The Bible refers to thousands of people. Although many of them are unnamed, and limited information is given about others, ample material has nonetheless been written about hundreds of Bible characters who present excellent subjects for sermons.

• Biographical preaching is too often neglected in textbooks, classrooms, and the pulpit.

It is unfortunate that in recent years biographical preaching has not received much emphasis in homiletics. Warren Wiersbe and Lloyd Perry identified only seven men whom they regard as famous biographical preachers: Clovis G. Chappell (1882-1972), Joseph Hall (1574-1656), John A. Hutton (1868-1947), Clarence Macartney (1879-1957), Frederick B. Meyer (1847-1929), George Matheson (1842-1906) and Alexander Whyte (1836-1921).⁴ Not one of these men is alive today; not one was even born in the twentieth century. Although some well-known modern preachers, such as Chuck Swindoll, do preach biographically on occasion, a lack of such preaching still exists.

Most contemporary homiletics texts either do not refer to biographical preaching or do not address it thoroughly enough to benefit the average pastor.⁵ If we neglect biographical preaching, we are missing a valuable tool in communicating God's truth to men and women of today.

³ Citations from "Preaching Biographically: An Interview with Chuck Swindoll" in the journal *Preaching* (Fall 2022), 16-19.

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe and Lloyd M. Perry, *The Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 296. Modern preachers such as Chuck Swindoll, Stuart Briscoe, and Gene Getz often employ the biographical approach, but none of them to the extent of those whom Wiersbe and Perry mention.

⁵ Bryan Chapell's often-used homiletics textbook, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) does not even list biographical preaching in its index. Haddon Robinson and Craig Larson, the editors of *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), of the 201 articles in their excellent text, do have a few articles (6 articles total; see Index) that only mention biographical preaching, but not a single article devoted to it.

- **Expository Preaching: Does (can) preaching about biblical characters fit this category?**

Get six preachers together and ask each to give a definition of expository preaching. You will likely hear six different definitions. Even among academicians and writers, there are differences of opinion on exactly what is or is not expository preaching. Although not all homiletics would categorize biographical preaching as truly expository; I assert it is (or should be!).

Often, preaching will be divided into such categories as topical, textual, and expository.⁶ In such a division, an expository sermon is one that deals with a single passage of Scripture that usually is more than one or two verses long. A textual sermon is one that deals with a passage of Scripture that is only one or two verses long. Finally, a topical sermon is one that usually draws its material from the topic under consideration, not necessarily from a single passage of Scripture, although some topics may be limited to a single passage.

A basic dictionary definition of exposition is “the act of expounding,” or the “display of the explanation.” An expository sermon, then, is one that expounds or explains accurately – through proper hermeneutics and careful exegesis – the truths of Scripture. An expository sermon may be defined as the development of **one or more units of Scripture** wherein the outline presents in well-organized progression the message of the passage(s) as it (they) relate(s) to the central thought (central theme). *The purpose, then, of expository preaching is to set forth the true meaning of the Scriptures.* This being the case, the separation of “textual” and “topical” sermons from “expository” sermons is somewhat arbitrary if all three types of sermons are truly expounding the meaning of the Scriptures.

Exposition of a **unit** of Scripture would include any single passage of Scripture to be expounded, regardless of its length; it may be a single verse, many verses, a chapter, or even a whole book of the Bible. Regardless of its length, however, the sermon expounds that unit (those units) of Scripture.⁷ James Braga states:

Two or three passages from various parts of Scripture can be put together to form the basis of an expository outline. **An expository unit does not have to consist of a single passage.** When two or three passages—brief or extended—are related, they can be treated as if they

⁶ For instance, James Braga, *How to Prepare Bible Messages* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 2005), 19-102.

⁷ Of significance here is a distinction of terms when discussing sermon categories: the exposition of a *unit of Scripture* and the exposition of a *topic of Scripture*. Whereas we customarily describe expository preaching as expounding accurately a unit of Scripture, the same principles of “expounding accurately” – through proper hermeneutics and careful exegesis – can be applied to a specific topic. Exposition of a topic of Scripture would include any type of topical study: a doctrine, a biography, a biblical concept. Therefore, biographical preaching is regarded as one form of expository preaching, yet, according to Charles W. Koller, it is a form the “seems never to have received the emphasis it deserves.” (See Charles W. Koller, “Emphasis in Preaching,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Practical Theology*, ed. Ralph G. Turnbull (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 22.) The goal of topic sermons is the same as that of unit of Scripture sermons—to expound accurately the truths of God’s Word.

were one. . . . Biographical sermons are often constructed along similar lines. Beginning with an extended Scripture passage about a Bible character, we can check every other reference to that person to get a composite picture for a biographical sermon outline. . . . Sermons derived from more extensive portions can produce variety in expository preaching.⁸

Erickson and Heflin agree with this approach and define expository preaching as “preaching that explains and clarifies a portion of Scripture (the sermon text), the truth of which has been discovered through careful study, with a view to making appropriate application of the truth to those who listen.”⁹ Lest someone think that Erickson and Heflin confine the “portion of Scripture” to only one particular passage, they go on to write,

Expository preaching, thus defined, allows the preacher to take as a text (then explain and apply) any portion of Scripture, whether a word, phrase, verse, two verses, or extended portion exceeding two or three verses. Indeed, the preacher may draw passages from one book or from more than one book of the Bible in one sermon. The texts are no less biblical because they do not all come contiguously, or for that matter, from chapters of the same book of the Bible.¹⁰

Therefore, biographical preaching is a form of expository preaching. Biographical preaching is that method of expository preaching that expounds a Bible character, based on the careful exegesis of one or more units of Scripture, to deduce the principles that regulated his or her life and to apply the principles to the modern listener.

Beware of imposing what we understand today upon Old Testament believers.

Renowned Old Testament scholar, professor, pastor, and author, Dr. Leon Wood aptly wrote:

We would do well to remind ourselves of the importance of preaching from the Old Testament, simply because of the great length of the Old Testament (3 ½ times that of the NT). . . . Remember the progressive character of God’s revelation. God did not reveal everything at one time, but gradually. Hence, Noah did not know as much as Abraham, nor Abraham as Moses. Every incident must be measured, then, in view of the amount of revelation by that time. . . .

The extensive historical section of the Old Testament might be likened to a two-level stage: earth below and heaven above. Men of all types, in all walks of life, and over centuries of time, play their roles below. God above is revealed in His just, yet gracious reaction. The great variety on the lower level provides ample illustration for any case at any time. Here walk the rich, the poor, the ruler, and the slave. Problems of all types are encountered and heartaches from every conceivable cause. Joyful hearts, sad hearts, courageous souls,

⁸ James Braga, *How to Prepare Bible Messages* (Portland: Multnomah, 1981, 2005), 74-75, 89. The bold is mine; added for emphasis.

⁹ Millard J. Erickson and James L. Heflin, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Doctrinal Preaching in a Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 170.

¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson and James L. Heflin, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Doctrinal Preaching in a Changing World*, 171.

defeated souls, obedient servants, rebellious servants, faithful stewards, unfaithful stewards—all are here as if in one long historical hall of pictures; pictures among which one may find his own, not only once but many times. And all the while God is seen looking down. His blessings flow when He is pleased; it is withheld when His will is unobserved. What a wide and practical area for preaching.¹¹

- **Salvation: The confusion about what was required of OT believers for their salvation**

There is but one method of salvation. Dispensationalists and nondispensationalists agree that it is by faith (Hebrews 11). Both dispensational and nondispensational interpreters agree that in all ages God graciously required of man faith, not works. Faith, then, is recognized by all as requisite for salvation. But faith in what or whom? At this point opinions diverge.

It is debatable as to how much understanding there was of the full import of the prophecies about the Messiah or how much the truth about Christ's coming redemptive work was involved in the presentation of the gospel in the Old Testament. What does not seem to be the case is that men consciously believed in Jesus Christ, for we do not find until the New Testament the explicitly stated revelation that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Christ.

Dispensationalists teach that salvation is always through God's grace. Charles Ryrie has offered perhaps the best expression: **The basis of salvation in every dispensation is the death of Christ; the requirement for salvation in every age is faith; the object of faith is the true God; but the content of faith changes in the various dispensations.**¹² To affirm a sameness in the content of faith would of necessity deny progressiveness in revelation (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2). Nondispensationalists may sometimes be guilty of reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament in order to be able to achieve uniformity in the content of faith.

The content of the faith of the Old Testament saints was not the incarnate, crucified Lamb of God. When they "looked forward" to the final sacrifice for sin, they did not see exactly what we see when we "look back" to the cross of Calvary. Even Christ's disciples did not understand clearly until after His death and resurrection (Jn 2:22). The content of the faith of the Old Testament saints was essentially God's redemptive revelation up to that point accompanied by an animal sacrifice. What saved a person then was a commitment to the God who had revealed that sin was to be expiated through sacrifices made in faith that God would give atonement. Therefore, in agreeing to respond positively to the specific content in any age, the believer was ultimately responding to the God who revealed the content (cf. Rom. 4:3).

- **Service and Sanctification: Properly Understanding of the Person and Work of The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments**¹³

¹¹ Excerpt from his paper, "Preaching from the Old Testament" delivered at a pastors' conference.

¹² A good discussion on the topic of salvation in dispensationalism is found in Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Moody Press, 2007), 121-142. This section follows his structure.

¹³ One of the clearest, succinct developments of this subject is found in Gary Inrig's commentary on Judges, *Hearts of Iron, Feet of Clay* (Chicago: Moody Press), 105-108.

When we communicate (preach) about the lives of various characters in the OT and the NT, notice those important phrases in Scripture that force us to ask some important questions about the ministry of God the Holy Spirit to men (and women) like Gideon, Samson, etc. in the OT times and His ministry to believers today. (For example, Judges 6:34 – “So the Spirit of the LORD clothed Himself with Gideon.”— This is a vivid way of saying that God the Holy Spirit took possession of Gideon, indwelling and controlling him.)

I. The Holy Spirit in the Old Covenant (OC)

There are four truths about the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of OT believers.

- A. *His ministry was limited in extent.* The OT believers were not all indwelt by the Holy Spirit. For example, Judges 6:34 records that He entered Gideon in this special way at this specific time. One of the great promises of the New Covenant prophecy in Jeremiah and Ezekiel was that, one day, all God’s children would be indwelt by the Spirit. But that is a New Covenant, not OC, blessing.
- B. *His ministry was limited in purpose.* When we read about the Spirit coming into men’s lives, it was for a special service or work that God had for that person to do. In the book of Judges, we are specifically told how He came upon the judges—Othniel, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. But we do not read of Him entering the lives of ordinary men for ordinary life.
- C. *His ministry was limited in time.* The Holy Spirit did not always permanently indwell His people. We read of His departing from Samson in Judges 16:20 and from Saul in 1 Samuel 16:14 (also, 1 Sam 19:11, 18-23, note especially v. 23).
- D. *His ministry was limited in effect.* When Gideon was clothed with the Holy Spirit, it was the external man, not the inner man who was affected. He was not transformed morally, so much as externally. Thus, this “Spirit clothed” man would lead the nation into apostasy in Judges 8. (Likewise, Jephthah was “filled with the Spirit,” but he made a sinful, superstitious vow. The Holy Spirit came upon Samson and made him physically powerful, but he remained a morally weak man. Strange as it seems, *the Holy Spirit did not always produce the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of the people He indwelt in Old Testament times.*

II. The Holy Spirit in the New Covenant (OC) (i.e., the post-Pentecost era; after Acts 2)

Note: We are not emphasizing the limitations of the OC ministry of the Spirit to minimize that Covenant, but rather to maximize the blessing, by contrast, of the New Covenant. Our position, as NT believers, is infinitely richer. The Holy Spirit in the NT:

- A. *He is unlimited in extent.* Every believer is indwelt by the Spirit. The HS is not for some believers or for special believers, but for all believers (Rm 8:9; Jn 7:39).
- B. *He is unlimited in purpose.* He is not given just for Christian service, but for life and living. It is by the Spirit that we are made adequate as servants of the New Covenant (2 Cor 3:5-6).

- C. *He is unlimited in duration.* The Lord Jesus promised the Holy Spirit will be with us forever (Jn 14:16-17). By God's Holy Spirit, we have been sealed and given the pledge of eternal life (2 Cor 3:5-6).
- D. *He is spiritual in effect.* His ministry in our lives is evidenced, above all else, by a transformation in our character (Gal 5:22-23). He does not simply strengthen our external man. Rather, we are "strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man" (Eph 3:16). Life's greatest needs are inner resources and godly character, and that is exactly the Holy Spirit's ministry today.

● **What does Scripture inform us about the Holy Spirit's Ministry in the lives of OT characters?**

I. Regeneration.

Did the Holy Spirit regenerate people in the Old Testament? In John 3 Jesus explained the new birth (which involved regeneration) to Nicodemus, reminding him that these things were taught in the Old Testament and therefore he ought to have known them (Jn. 3:10; ref. Isa. 63:7-13). Likely Jesus was referring to Ezekiel 36, because both passages involve a discussion of water and Spirit. In Ezekiel 11:19 and 36:25-27 God promises Israel a regeneration experience in the Millennium. God will give them a new heart and a new spirit – He will put His Spirit within them; He will regenerate them. Although these passages pertain to the future, the Old Testament believers would have experienced some sort of regeneration, but not accompanied with the New Covenant blessings of the HS described in Ezekiel 36:25-27. In Ezekiel 18:31 the people were commanded to "make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit." The two phrases parallel those of Ezekiel 36:25-27 as well as John 3:5 and suggest the Old Testament believer was, in a sense, regenerated by the Holy Spirit (cf. also Ps. 51:10). But the New Covenant believer (Pentecost – Acts 2 and thereafter), would experience the "seal" (signifying ownership, permanence, and security),¹⁴ as well as the "pledge" (guarantee, earnest, down payment)¹⁵ of the Holy Spirit. The OT form of regeneration was not accompanied by the full assurance and security that the NT believer experiences.

¹⁴ The Holy Spirit is identified as the seal of the believer (II Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30). A seal means securing or fastening a stone with a seal as in Matthew 27:66 by the Roman authorities. Figuratively, sealing means to "mark (with a seal) as a means of identification . . . in papyri, of all kinds of animals, so that the mark which denotes ownership also carries with it the protection of the owner."¹⁴ Cattle branding would be a modern parallel of ancient sealing (cf. Isa. 44:5; Ezek. 9:4).

¹⁵ In II Corinthians 1:22 Paul says God "gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge." The word pledge (Gr. *arrabon*) means a "first installment," "deposit," "down payment," "pledge," that pays a part of the purchase price in advance, and so secures a legal claim to the article in question, or makes contract valid. The *arrabon* is a payment which obligates the contracting party to make further payments. Ephesians 1:14 reveals the nature of the Holy Spirit as the down payment of our ultimate and complete glorification in heaven. "Redemption" in Ephesians 1:14 looks forward to the final stage of the believer's redemption, that is, his ultimate glorification. The Holy Spirit as a pledge is a symbol of the believer's security in Christ.

II. Selective Indwelling.

In John 14:1-17 Jesus indicated that following Pentecost the Holy Spirit would begin a new ministry to believers that was unlike that of the Old Testament. The emphasis of this passage is that the new ministry would be an indwelling (in contrast to the Spirit simply being with them, or upon) and it would be permanent. While the promise of John 14 pertains to all believers and the indwelling is permanent, there was indwelling in the Old Testament, however, it was **selective**, and it was **temporary**.

- A. The Holy Spirit indwelt some people in the Old Testament. The Spirit indwelt Joshua (Num. 27:18) and David (I Sam. 16:12-13).¹⁶
- B. The Holy Spirit came upon some people in the Old Testament. Ryrie suggests there is no great distinction between “indwelling” and “coming upon,” “except that the idea of coming upon seems to imply the temporary and transitory character of the Spirit’s relationship to the Old Testament saints.”¹⁷ The temporary coming upon is seen in that the Spirit came upon an individual for a specific task. It is reasonable to assume that when the task had been carried out, the Spirit was no longer upon the individual. The Spirit came upon Othniel to conquer Cushan-rishathaim (Judg. 3:10); He came upon Gideon to defeat the Midianites (Judg. 6:34); He came upon Jephthah to defeat the Ammonites (Judg. 11:29); He came upon Samson to defeat the Philistines (Judg. 14:6); He came upon Balaam to prophecy blessing concerning Israel (Num. 24:2). “An evaluation of these texts shows that all involved empowerment for a physical activity. None of them had to do with salvation from sin in any sense.”¹⁸ Nor did the empowering have anything to do with the spiritual condition of the person. Jephthah was the son of a harlot, living in an idolatrous environment. Samson was a carnal man, living to satisfy his carnal desires. Balaam was an unbeliever.
- C. The Holy Spirit filled some people in the Old Testament. God filled Bezalel with the Spirit, giving him wisdom for craftsmanship “to make artistic designs for work in gold, in silver” (Ex. 31:2-5) to beautify the tabernacle.

John Walvoord makes three observations concerning Old Testament indwelling. He points out that first, the Spirit’s indwelling in the life of a person had no evident relationship to the person’s spiritual condition. Second, the Spirit’s indwelling was a sovereign working of God in the person to perform a specific task, for example, delivering Israel in warfare or building the tabernacle. Third, the Spirit’s indwelling was temporary. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Saul but also departed from him (I Sam. 10:10; 16:14). David was fearful that the Holy Spirit would leave him (Ps. 51:11).¹⁹

¹⁶There is a question of how to understand *ruach* in v. 12. The NASB translated it “mind” and relates it to David’s mind. KJV and NKJV translate it “by the Spirit,” while the NIV translates it “all the Spirit had put in his mind.”

¹⁷Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, 41-42.

¹⁸Leon Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 41.

¹⁹Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 72.

III. Restraining Sin.

Genesis 6:3 indicates the Spirit's striving or restraining sin would be limited because man refused to heed the Spirit's convicting ministry. In the context, God judged the people with the Noahic flood.²⁰ To those holding to a pretribulation rapture a parallel may be seen between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

IV. Ability for Service.

The Holy Spirit was given in the Old Testament to select individuals to perform specific tasks. Such enabling included: ability in artistic work for the Tabernacle and Temple, given to Bezalel (Ex. 31:2-5; 35:30-35) and Hiram (I Kgs. 7:14); ability to lead the nation, given to Joshua (Num. 27:16-18), Saul (I Sam. 10:10), and David (I Sam. 16:13); ability in warfare, given to Othniel (Judg. 3:10), Gideon (Judg. 6:34), and Jephthah (Judg. 11:29); and unusual physical strength, given to Samson (Judg. 14:19).

Beware of imposing our understanding as Church-age saints on the Apostles (and others) in the Gospels.

When we study and preach from the Gospels, and we look at the lives of the followers of Christ, particularly the Apostles—realize that they are living “between the times.” Realize, they were:

- I. *They were quite ordinary men* (Mk. 1:16-20). As ordinary men:
 - They had ordinary education (if any) in local synagogues; not above average.
 - They had ordinary backgrounds: involved in the trades, occupations common to society. (They came from lower- or middle-class families, all Jews.)
 - They were young men; some married with families (Peter, Mt. 8:14; 1 Cor. 9:5)
- II. *They demonstrated that they were, without a doubt, imperfect men.*

The gospels (all four) picture these men with character imperfections and spiritual weaknesses. Recall several incidents: (almost humorous)

 - They became afraid of a storm on the sea of Galilee.
 - In Gethsemane they fell asleep when they were asked by Jesus Christ to watch and pray.
 - Their indignation at Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet with costly perfume (Mt. 26:8)
 - They suffered lapses of memory just like us. On one occasion, after crossing the Sea of Galilee, they discovered they had forgotten to bring bread (Mt. 16:5)
 - Jesus had to rebuke them for their unbelief which stood in the way of their casting out demons from a possessed child.
 - Two of them wanted to incinerate a town (Luke 9:54f)—“let's burn it down!” given to passions, anger, lacked emotional discipline

²⁰There is a problem regarding the word “strives,” *yadon*. Some suggest it means “to rule” or “to abide.” Nonetheless, “the thought is that God will not forever bear the consequences of man's sin” (Harold Stigers, *Commentary on Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975], 98).

- They entertained false perceptions: (John 9) they thought a man’s blindness was caused by sin, either his or his parents’ (old superstitious Jewish ideas).
- They were slow learners; took them awhile to grasp spiritual truths—proof: Jesus often is found quoted saying, “fools and slow of heart.” (You guys don’t catch on!)
- At times, they kept people from coming to Jesus: ex. They blocked mothers from bringing children to Jesus.
- They were arrogant; they boasted that they would never deny Jesus but would even die for Him. At His arrest they all forsook Him and fled.

In addition, they had personal and spiritual inadequacies. Jesus noted five areas:

1. Their lack of (spiritual) understanding. (Ex: They didn’t understand His parables and precepts (Mt. 15:15,16) or His mission (16:21-23).)
2. Their lack of humility. (Ex: They argued over prominence and position (Mt. 20:20-28); Mk. 9:33-37; Lk. 22:25)
3. Their lack of faith. (Ex: The most common phrase Jesus said to them was “O ye of little faith” (Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). In Mk. 4:40, “How is it ye have no faith?”)
4. Their lack of commitment. (Ex: Judas betrayed him—how was that even possible? Peter denied him; “They all forsook him, and fled” (Mk. 14:5))
5. Their lack of spiritual power. (Ex: Mt. 17:14-21)

III. *They were selectively, temporarily empowered for spiritual service in the “Gospel era.”*

- A. Similar to people during the OT era they were empowered for selective service. Prior to Pentecost (Acts 2) when the Holy Spirit came upon them and permanently indwelt them, the disciples of Christ experienced Holy Spirit power working through them as they preached and performed miracles (see Matt 10:1-14, esp. vs. 7-8; see also Luke 10:1-24, esp. v. 9).
- B. This empowerment was temporary and selective (for specific individuals), and for a particular ministry—much like what occurred in the life of selective OT individuals.
- C. Of note is that even Judas received this same empowerment for service (cf. Num 22:28, even Balaam’s donkey was temporarily, miraculously empowered). Judas received temporary, miraculous empowerment though he would prove unfaithful.

III. *They became transformed men. What brought on the transformation?*

- A. They were teachable.
To get across His message to mankind, Jesus needed pliable, childlike, unpretentious followers. Though they might have been slow to learn, they had to be willing to learn. If filled with their own knowledge, they would have no room for His wisdom. (Ref. Luke 6:40, “a pupil is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher.” Acts 4:13; Luke 11:1—“Lord, teach us to pray.”)

- B. They were trained/disciple/mentored by Jesus.
They lived in His presence for three years of concentrated schooling. They heard His matchless words, saw His startling miracles, observed His unerring rectitude. They ate, slept, and talked with Him. To know God and become like Him, they spent time with Him.
- C. They were *changed, spiritually transformed by the Holy Spirit* of God (Acts 2 – at **Pentecost**). The Holy Spirit transformed them from cowards to courageous men, willing to boldly preach and face impending death; and as a result, they would be used to transform the world through the Gospel message. They became the foundation of the church, exhibiting the transforming power of God (Eph 2:19-22)

Beware of imposing our (mis)understanding and humanity on the person of Jesus Christ.

Understanding the concept of Jesus as the God-Man is difficult for any of us. This concept of the *hypostatic* union of the divine and human natures in one Person is probably one of the most difficult concepts to comprehend in theology. Not one of us has ever seen Deity except as the Scriptures reveal God, and not one of us has ever seen perfect humanity except as the Scriptures reveal pre-fallen Adam and our Lord. To try to relate these two concepts to the person of Christ adds complexities to ideas that are in themselves difficult to comprehend.

The Scriptures teach the humanity of Jesus. However, they also show that He did not possess man's sinful, fallen nature (1 John 3:5). In his humanity, the body of Jesus was like the bodies of other men except for those qualities which have resulted from human sin and failure. As such, He exhibited the characteristics of a human being. Our Lord was hungry (Mt. 4:2). He was thirsty (Jn. 19:28). He grew weary (4:6). He experienced love and compassion (Mt. 9:36). He wept (Jn. 11:35). He was tested (Heb. 4:15). These are characteristics of true humanity.

There is the tendency, however, to “read into” some of the episodes in Christ's ministry a humanity that is not textually warranted and the result is that we rob a passage of its full theological impact. We attribute a human response/action to Jesus that we think we might exhibit if we were in that situation. One such example occurs in one of the most familiar, and important passages, that we recite when we share the gospel or turn to when we offer comfort when at the loss of a loved one. Let's take note – John 11:1-53 (especially 11:25-44).

Preaching the Gospel, and the Lives that Convey the Gospel Message

We often hear today, “Just preach the gospel!” Sounds simple, but “the gospel” has a variety of meanings. What is “the gospel”? Ask several folks and it is likely you will get several answers:

- as in “sharing the gospel” – the good news; the plan of salvation; centered on evangelism
- as in Rm 1:16 – “*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation . . .*”
- as in 1 Cor 9:23 – “*I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I might share with them in its*

blessings” – opportunity to minister

- as in 1 Thess 2:4 – “*But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God.*” Similarly, Acts 20:24 – “*I do not count my life dear . . . , if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*” – the ministry life; the calling of God to ministry
- the Gospel of the Kingdom – storyline behind our worldview of everything
- as the emphasis today of what is most important, central to what motivates one’s ministry, as found in the expression “being gospel centered” – cross-centered (focus is back on the cross-work of Jesus Christ) versus eschatologically-centered (future focused).

The Message: We Have a Story to Tell the Nations

Beware of over-simplifying the Gospel message. Let us offer this definition of the “gospel”:

Revelation is God’s act of disclosing to us who he is and what he is doing. God’s complete self-disclosure will come only at the end of the age. Only then will we see Christ “as he is” (1 Jn 3:2). Nevertheless, throughout history God has revealed the divine nature and divine intentions.

Although at work everywhere, God has chosen to focus the divine efforts. In ancient times God worked with Israel, for this nation was to play a special role in history. Since the coming of Jesus, God has concentrated the divine work primarily through the church. The Bible indicates how God entered into special relationship, or covenant, first with Israel and later with the church. And it shows how the Holy Spirit led the ancient faith communities to respond to this special relationship. Lying at the heart of the Bible is the story of Jesus the Christ, who is the fulfillment of what God had begun to do in the Old Testament era. The New Testament narrates the grand events surrounding Christ’s coming, especially Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection, as well as the expansion of the early church under the direction of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament likewise presents certain of the implications the early Christian leaders (Paul, John, and others) drew from these events. This biblical message—which we call the “gospel”—forms the foundation for Christian theology.²¹

Thus, the gospel is the complete story; the Bible’s storyline – that story includes creation, fall, redemption, consummation, recreation. Scripture also makes it clear that in that complete story, Christ and the cross-work must remain at the center of the gospel. And it is imperative that we must carefully explain to folks—as we “share the gospel”—about the death and resurrection of Jesus and the response God requires of sinners. If we say merely that God is redeeming a people and remaking the world, but do not say *how he is doing so* (through the atoning work of Jesus Christ) and *how a person can be included in that redemption* by receiving Christ as one’s personal Savior, through repentance from sin and faith in Jesus, and thereafter identifying with Christ and observing (obeying) His Word (Matt 28:19-20), then we have not actually proclaimed the good news to them. “We have simply told the narrative of the Bible in broad outline and left sinners with their faces pressed against the window, looking in.”²² That story is our message, our

²¹Taken from Stanley J. Grenz & Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 93.

²²Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Gospel?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 107

life's motivation, our hope behind everything we believe, and it's wrapped up in a Person(s) – the Triune God.

NOTE that:

- 1) The gospel story is centered on the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the “last Adam” (I Cor 15:3-5, 20-28, 45).
- 2) The changes we see across the development of that story (i.e., Progressive Revelation).
- 3) The importance of getting our “story” right when we tell it – especially the various characters we encounter through the ages (especially the OT characters, their faith and obedience to God).
- 4) The place and purpose of Israel and the Church in God's plan.
- 5) The over-arching purpose for the entire story in the first place – God's glory (Ps 96:3, 108:5; Isa 40:5, 43:7; 48:11; Lk 2:14; Mt 25:31; Rm 8:18).

What does Christ-centered teaching and preaching look like?²³

Following the creation passages at the outset of Genesis, all of Scripture is a record of God's dealings with a corrupted world and its creatures. But the record does not merely recite historical facts. It reveals an ongoing drama whereby God systematically, personally, and progressively discloses the necessity and detail of his plan to use the Son to redeem and restore creation. Sidney Greidanus notes the implications this organic view of Scripture holds for proper exposition of any text. He writes,

The unity of redemptive history implies the *Christocentric* nature of every historical text. Redemptive history is the history of Christ. He stands at its center, but no less at its beginning and end. . . . Scripture discloses the theme, the scopus of its historiography right at the beginning. “Gen. 3:15,” Van't Veer says, “places all subsequent events in the light of the tremendous battle between Christ coming into the world and Satan the ruler of this world, and it places all events in the light of the complete victory which the Seed of the woman shall attain. In view of this, it is imperative that not one single person be isolated from this history and set apart from this great battle. The place of both opponents and ‘co-workers’ can only be determined Christologically. Only in so far as received their place and task in the development of *this* history do they appear in the historiography of Scripture. From this point of view the facts are selected and recorded.”²⁴

A sermon becomes Christ-centered, not because the preacher finds a slick way of wedging a reference to Jesus' person or work into the message but because the sermon identifies a function this particular text legitimately serves in the great drama of the Son's crusade against the serpent.

This mature view of Christ-centered preaching warns preachers not to believe they have properly expounded a text simply because they have identified something in it that reminds them of an

²³Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 293-295. The material in this section is from Chapell's discussion.

²⁴ Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970), 135.

event in Jesus' life and ministry. When the preacher uses a geographical reference to a well in the Old Testament to introduce a discussion of Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well, no real explanation of the original passage's place and meaning in redemptive history has occurred. The preacher has only engaged in a bit of word play. The same is true when a preacher leapfrogs to the New Testament from some feature of Moses' law or some event in Israel's kingship simply because some detail in the account seems similar to something Christ did.

When preachers interpret Rahab's red cloth, the wood on Isaac's back, the saddle on Rachel's camel, and the spices in Solomon's house (to name only a few possibilities) as representing some aspects of Christ's ministry, their conclusions may sound biblical. However, if Scripture does not confirm this interpretation such preachers only relate what their minds suggest rather than what the text means. To the extent that what is in the preacher's mind reflects a truth found elsewhere in Scripture no harm may occur, but the minister's mind is a poor place to discern what a biblical passage means.

Similar interpretive errors occur when pastors believe that they must find Christ hiding behind every bush on the plain of Old Testament history. Feeling the obligation to discern Jesus in such passages, these preachers search out the implications of tiny "messianic lights" in pre-crucifixion texts in order to make some reference to the atonement. Writes Greidanus, "This conception of Christ as the eternal Logos actively at work throughout history removes the props from the traditional insistence that every sermon must somehow point to Christ Incarnate in order to be Christocentric."²⁵

There is practical value to understanding the Person of Christ across Scripture (i.e., his pre-existence in the Old Testament.). For example, if the Angel of the Lord is really the pre-existent Christ (Second Person of the Trinity, Word, cf. Jn 1:1-3, 14, 18), then the Old Testament is full of Christ. Rolland McCune writes:

He [Person of Christ] can be found in scores of contexts, if only the reader has eyes to see Him. In fact, Jesus himself underwrites this Christocentric reading of the Old Testament when He castigates the religious leaders of His day, saying, "You search the Scriptures because you think you in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:39-40). Surely, a generous part of that testimony comprises references to the angel of the Lord. And, certainly much can be learned from the angel's many appearances and activities.²⁶

Expository preaching need not mention Golgotha, Bethlehem, or the Mount of Olives to remain Christ-centered. So long as the preacher uses a text's statements or context to expose the theological truths or historical facts that demonstrate the relation of the passage to the overall war between the Seed of the woman and Satan, Christ assumes his rightful place as the focus of the message.

²⁵ Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 143.

²⁶ Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, Vol 2 [Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009], 99. McCune then list at least sixteen appearances of the Angle of the Lord, with lessons for believers.

Practical Principles for Preaching and/or Teaching Biblical Narratives & Characters

1. Interpret according to narrative discourse structure

Narrative represents a distinct discourse type that follows a plotline scheme with distinct elements:

- Introduction: setting, character introduction
- Inciting Moment/Initial Conflict
- Ratcheting up of tension: series of events, actions that build tension
- Climax: Solution/Deliverance from tensions; event that releases the tension
- Resolution: Unwinding of tension within the story
- Conclusion: Aftermath events and “happily ever after”

Examples:

- 1 Samuel 1 and 2: Hannah’s predicament that leads to Samuel
Layered: The birth of Samuel himself is part of the introduction to 1 and 2 Samuel that sets the scene for David
- 1 Samuel 3: God’s call on Samuel that brings Israel out of its spiritual darkness

Importance of Narrative Plot:

- Narrative employment distinguishes itself from hortatory or expository discourse. Hortatory texts motivate the reader to adopt a course of action prescribed by the author (the identifying verbal feature is the imperative or its exhortation substitute). Expository texts teach content or provide information (indicative verbs).
- Narrative, especially biblical narrative, most likely is attempting to get the reader to adopt a course of action or move them to decision, but it does so in a different way than hortatory texts (epistolary literature; teachings of Jesus; prophetic texts; wisdom literature such as Ps. 1)
- Therefore, you can’t just jump in with Gordon Fee’s *New Testament Exegesis* approach and get all that is entailed in interpreting and preaching biblical narratives.
- I highly recommend you begin by consulting Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, especially the sections on discourse and narratives.

2. Actions taken will be key.

- Narratives are moved along by actions taken in sequence moving toward climax. Many times, the first actions or inactions taken lead to the conflict in the passage that will need to be resolved (actions of Eli’s sons and inaction of Eli: old and inability to see clearly).
- Biblical stories follow narrative discourse structure like modern writing and novels in that its plot moves toward climax followed by resolution. In modern storytelling, the narrator spends a great deal of time on the inner conflict involved in the thinking and mindset of

the main character. Sometimes the story will be told exclusively from the perspective of this main character and his/her thinking. Biblical stories spend much less time on the mental and psychological features of the characters. What a biblical character believed as evidenced by what they did seems to be what interested biblical narrators.

- Pacing of the action is critical to find both the climax as well as to see what is emphasized. Genesis 1–11 covers thousands of years of human history in basically five key episodes (creation; fall; Cain-Abel; flood; Babel). Genesis 12–22 covers 50 years of a single man's life. When stories slow down and spend lengthy amounts of textual time on actions taken, something important is being communicated (Joseph story and interactions with brothers).
- Relevance: Faith and Works; Belief results in Practice. The biblical narratives seem less interested in merely an expressed faith or psychological disposition of belief that ascends to one thing but practices something else. True belief leads to right action. God judges based on the works or fruit of one's life, not the head-knowledge or stated head-knowledge of what God has revealed.

3. God remains the main character

- Always be looking for where God shows up in the story. Both his presence and his absence (Esther; David outside the land) convey a great deal of meaning.
- I would suggest that in most narratives, if you haven't gotten to God showing up in the story in one way or another, you haven't reached the boundary of the story, nor the ultimate climax of that scene.
- God's actions many times are the climactic element to bring resolution. He remains the hero of His story.
- Further, he will act in ways that surprise at times to reveal significant theological truths about Himself (Regret/Repent/Change mind in 1 Samuel 15).

4. Pay attention to key words/themes that get reiterated or emphasized.

- From our own experience of preaching, we know the importance of key words or phrases to draw people's attention back to the theme at hand.
- Here is where modern translations do us a great injustice in capturing main themes of narratives and stories. Many times, they translate the same Hebrew and Greek words with different English words or phrases to convey the meaning of the text. All translations end up doing this, because it's simply part of the translational process. It's crucial though to find repeated words and phrases. These will convey key themes within a story, foreshadow things to come that impact the larger story, or recall key ideas from past scenes that have led to this scene.
 - Weight and Glory: 1 Samuel 2:8, 29, 30; 4:18–22; 5:6, 11; 6:5–6; 15:30; 31:3
 - Eyes, Seeing, and Blindness (1 Samuel 1–4)
 - Sounds, Hear/Obey, and Rebellion: 1 Samuel 12:14–15; chap. 15