

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

J. Embracing God's Priorities

28. Reading and Living the Scriptures Well

We've been speaking of fulfilling our responsibilities as those chosen for a special relationship with God. As God's firstborn, as his prophets, priests, and kings, we are to embrace God's priorities. And one of the first things to get right in this regard is to learn to read and live the Scriptures well.

Let's agree at the outset that all world religions have their sacred writings, so Christianity is not unique in that regard. However, among sacred writings, the Bible has no equal. It was written over a period of 1600 years in three languages, by over 40 authors from every walk of life. Yet there is one theme; despite the many authors and the hundreds of controversial topics it treats, there is a unity which binds the whole together. All of it, from start to finish focuses on, and contributes to, God's redemption of humanity. And God's Word is absolutely dependable with regard to this goal: it never deceives, it makes no mistakes, and it does the job that God intends it to do. It can do that because *It is God-breathed*. It is inspired; literally: infused with God's breath. All these books written by so many different authors and speaking to so many different situations have the stamp of God's approval - even more - of God's inspiration.

Some of these people wrote line after line of laws, some wrote down collections of wise sayings, some wrote letters, some stories. All used their own language, style, and personality. Not one of them was perfect, as each would have been quick to say. But in all of them, God was at work—not mechanically as with robots, but working through their personalities—making sure that what he wanted to say got passed on in writing. It is because of inspiration that there is such good coordination in scripture, and also that earlier writings were proved accurate by later events and later writers could justifiably point to foreshadowings in previous events.

The proper interpretation of Scripture may not always be clear because we do not completely understand the culture and customs of biblical times, and we know even less about the common fund of information shared by biblical writers and audiences; we live in another time and culture. But, as the apostle Paul claims, and as the confessions of our church make clear, even if some things remain in doubt "What the Bible says, God says. What the Bible says, it says with the authority of the Creator and Savior of the universe."

And it has the capability of helping God's people so much. First of all it has the capability of bringing people to faith. And after that, of helping people to grow in faith and serve God wholeheartedly. When you read the Bible with an open heart and mind, God comes to you, where you are, and gives you what you need. You don't necessarily understand everything right away. But the Holy Spirit uses what you read to reach you and to change your life.

But there seems to be a bit of a problem with this nice picture. Are people's lives really being transformed? It should be happening, what with all of the Bibles and Bible Study helps around. The Bible is not only the best-selling book of all time, it is the best-selling book every single year. I suppose that's partly because there seems to be a Bible geared to every market niche: The Maxwell Leadership Bible, the Archaeological Study Bible, Life in the Spirit and Fruit of the Spirit Study Bibles, End Times Bible, Prophecy Study Bible, Reformation Study Bible, The Minister's Bible, Children's Ministry Resource Bible, Senior's Study Bible, Life Recovery Bible, Men's and Women's Study Bibles, Chicken Soup for the Soul Bible, Precious Moments Bible, just to mention a few.

And then there are other versions of the Bible designed to look like magazines: Becoming (for young women and addressing the topics of men, beauty, fitness, food, etc), Resolve (for girls), Refuel (for boys). All of these, if you assume the best motives, are meant to help people understand God's Word better and live as God wants us to live.

Mind you, there are critical voices about this trend to customize the Bible for every niche group. Biblical scholar DA Carson says, "I view with unmitigated horror the multiplication of Bibles with notes designed for narrower and narrower groups. It will not surprise me if we soon have Bibles designed for left-handed athletes from Nebraska. These trends merely serve the idolatrous notion that God and his Word exist primarily to serve us in all our self-focused individuality." p16-17

Here's the rub: Despite the popularity and multiplication of Bibles, biblical literacy is on the decline. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, KY, calls it a scandal. He cited a survey which showed that 81% of the people who identified themselves as born-again Christians, thought that "God helps those who help themselves," was a Bible verse. A majority of adults think the Bible teaches that the most important purpose in life is taking care of one's family—something very important, to be sure, but that's hardly what the Westminster Shorter Catechism identifies as man's chief end: "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." Choose whichever statistic or survey you like, the general pattern is the same. America's Christians know less and less about the Bible. And not only do we know less and less, the Bible seems to be losing its power to transform our lives and our world.

Part of the reason for that is that according to the American Bible Society, only about a quarter of Americans read their Bibles on a regular basis. And many of these tend to reduce their reading to what Glenn Paauw calls "scripturettes" (Glenn Paauw is the Executive Director of the Biblica Institute for Bible Reading). And by scripturettes he means just a verse or two, maybe with a devotional on them. Of course, this is not bad as part of a strategy, but bigger readings are important for us to experience the Bible's transformative power.

Glenn Paauw in "Saving the Bible from Ourselves" says, "The Bible needs saving, not because of any defect in itself, but because we've buried it, boxed it in, wallpapered over it, neutered it, distorted it, isolated it, individualized it, minimized it, misread it, lied about it, debased it and oversold it. We have over-complicated its form while over-simplifying its content. We have become cavalier and even cheesy with our Bibles."

All the additions and complications are supposedly for the purpose of helping people to use the Bible, but, as Paauw points out, there is actually a Bible engagement breakdown. "Bible readers have been sold the mistaken notion that the Bible is a look-it-up-and-find-the-answer handy guide to life. They've been encouraged to treat the Scriptures as if they were a collection of doctrinal, devotional, and moralistic statements that can be accessed and chosen at will... The superficial use of the Scriptures is actually destructive because those who practice it operate under the illusion that they are engaging the Bible when they are not. They're rarely even aware of what they're missing." 15-16

Paauw writes about a Sunday School teacher who asked his class which of the following the Bible is most like: (A) Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, (B) The Reader's Digest Guide to Home Repairs, or (C) The Collected Papers of the American Anti-Slavery Society.

Many people treat the Bible like (A) Bartlett's Familiar Quotations; they like to mine Scripture for those verses that seem to capture a lot of truth in one brief statement.

Others (many of the niche Bibles) treat it like (B) A How-to Book: Here's how to be truly beautiful; here's how to raise your children; here's how to conquer your addiction.

Neither (A) nor (B) is entirely inappropriate, of course. But the Bible is more like (C) the Collected Papers of the American Anti-Slavery Society. It's a collection of books of different styles and by different authors whose messages, by the power of the Holy Spirit, come together to form a single story that changes our lives.

What Carson and Paauw say really resonates with me. Our lives will not be changed by sampling Scripture in neat little devotionals, or by using it to quickly look up answers for the immediate problems we face. Through Scripture, God himself wants to come into our lives to remake us in the image of his Son – not according to our limited pre-conceived notions and questions, but as he wants.

Listen to what these Scriptures say about what God intends his Word to do:

Isa 55:11 *My word that goes out from my mouth...will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Jer 23:29 *"Is not my word like fire," declares the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"*

John 6:63 (Jesus to his disciples): *The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life.*

Heb 4:12 *The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

Do you see that what God intends is usually far more and often much different than we can imagine? It's certainly true that Study Bibles and other tools can help with the details, but we can't get lost in the details and lose the big picture. And although it's good when we find specifics in Scripture to help meet various challenges in our lives, we mustn't skip the context and the stories in which those specifics are found. You see, God has things to teach us that we never even thought of asking about.

There are no shortcuts, as if we can achieve the goal either by undervaluing Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—or by racing through the Scriptures and getting right to the details of how to live. Application is good, of course—even vital—but the hard part of the life that God wants for us is coming to understand the message of Scripture, and the easy part is application—to know **how** it applies at least; whether or not one **does** it is another matter.

To be sure, Scripture is concerned about application; the Ten Commandments, eg., are pretty clear directives on how to live. But, the idea that Scripture is all about application results too often in moralism: "Jacob was a deceiver; don't you be a deceiver." "Daniel stood up for his faith; dare to be a Daniel." "Esther was both beautiful and responsible; be like Esther." Moralism has less egregious forms too, but the tendency remains. Such an approach has little regard for the historical unfolding of God's redemption.

This focus on application has prompted different kinds of sermons: "How to" or "How not to" lists. I have no inherent objection to such lists. Scripture does give clear guidance on how to have a good marriage and the sorts of things parents need to do with and for their children, etc. But a premature or exclusive focus on application does not have enough respect for all that God wants to teach us in his Word.

- Some preachers and churches emphasize biblical rules for behavior, as if the Bible is little more than a handbook for morality.
- Others use the Bible to try to reproduce the feelings associated with spirituality—perhaps with the aid of contextless (and even random) Scripture verses on which people can concentrate each day.
- There are even churches that use Scripture merely as one of several tools to help us learn the practical lessons of personal and communal life, lessons that some think are really better taught by modern advances in psychology, sociology, environmentalism, etc., together with a strong dose of community responsibility.

I'm not saying that Scripture has nothing to say about such things, but that, as important as the application of Scripture is, it is more about God's self-revelation than it is about what to do with it. It is about who God is and what he does and why he does it and how persistent he is, and faithful, and merciful, and just... Then, secondarily, it is about what people to whom God has revealed himself and his purposes did and do with that revelation.

That's why I'm coming to think that we'll do better, when we read Scripture, to forget about application at first—not forget about it entirely, of course, but at first—so that our own questions and problems will not hinder us from hearing what God wants us to hear.

How did Jesus treat God's self-revelation in the Scriptures available to him—the Old Testament? I contend that he didn't use it first of all as his guideline for conduct (which he needed despite being God's Son), but primarily to help him know God's character and plans and purposes. Only then could he bring his own conduct and plans into alignment with God's. In other words, Jesus allowed Scripture to tell him what God was like, and knowing that, grow him into the person God wanted him to be. Indeed, life with God is more about who you are than about what you do. Of course, what you do reflects or betrays who you are. But the fix is not to concentrate on what you do so much as see who God is and what he wants and then invite the Holy Spirit to change who you are to conform to what you've seen.

Notice how Jesus treated that preeminent list of biblical “what to do's”—the Ten Commandments. He consistently showed that these are really impossible to obey—impossible, that is, unless people are radically changed, inside and out, by an encounter with God. Only as we come to love God more than anything can we even come close to loving our neighbors as ourselves. That's why Jesus always focused on being more than doing, and on process more than results. And the first step in the process is to know God. He will take care of the rest; he will accomplish what he wants to accomplish through us.

Admittedly, the New Testament epistles focus more on application than the gospels or Old Testament. They are applicatory sermons on what the writers had learned about God and what he wants. But when you read the Scripture—the Old Testament, Gospels, and New Testament narratives in particular—look for what it tells you about God: about his character, his initiatives, and his goals, plans, and purposes.

If you see these and have a heart for God, how can you do anything but fall on your face in astonishment and reverence, and afterwards, let what you've seen transform your life.

- Like Jacob, who met God at what he later named Bethel saying: “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”
- Like the people of Israel, on several occasions during the leadership of Moses when the glory of the Lord was revealed to them.

- Like David, who, upon hearing God’s promise of a dynasty, said in astonishment: “Who am I, Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?”
- Like Solomon and the people of Israel at the dedication of the temple, who witnessed so much glory that the priests could not even enter the temple to carry out their service.
- Like Isaiah, who, on the occasion of his commission, was at first terrified by the glory of the Lord, and afterwards emboldened to enter God’s service.
- Like Peter, James, and John at Jesus’s transfiguration.
- Like Jesus who, through so many times alone with the Father, was confirmed in his service and enlightened about the next steps to take.
- Like Paul at his conversion.
- Like John, in his glimpses of God’s glory in heaven.

With all of these people, and many others, it was only after seeing the awesome and glorious majesty of God, and the perfect marriage between his justice and his mercy, that they could understand what the Lord required of them. Except for Jesus, they were often inconsistent in their obedience. Still, **what all of the heroes of the faith were able to accomplish was made possible by their attention to the character and desires of God as a basis for understanding what God required of them. That’s how God gets his work done through each of us as well.** We can’t participate in God’s reformation of the world unless and until God reforms us. And that begins by meeting him in the Holy Spirit enlivened pages of Scripture. After this, we can ask, “What does God require of **me**?”

And equally importantly, “What does God require of **us**?” for God has always been after more than the snatching of individual souls from hell, as important as each individual is in his eyes. God is building a kingdom—a community in whom he dwells and over whom he rules and through whom—because of the witness of their lives—he blesses their world and also draws more people into that community.

So we need to get serious about engaging the Bible with big readings in order that we may better understand the big story that God has been proclaiming throughout and through which the Holy Spirit works to transform our lives and our world.

In fact, that’s really what I hope “Longing for a Better Country” will reinforce in you. Remember, it is in no way meant to be a substitute for engaging the Scripture itself but rather is a tool to help you do that and also help you to better understand the connections between the Old and New Testaments and also to reinforce in your mind a better sense of the continuity of God’s whole story of redemption.