

# Preaching From The Old Testament

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Johann Bengel, an outstanding Lutheran theologian of the post-Reformation period, once made the interesting, if disturbing statement: "The Scripture is the foundation of the church; the church is the guardian of the Scripture. As a rule, the way in which the church treats the Scripture corresponds exactly with the condition of the church."

No one will deny that the church which bears the name of Jesus Christ has come upon evil days. If Bengel's evaluation is correct, there's a cause and effect relationship between conditions in the church and the church's stewardship of the revealed afford of her Lord.

## Widespread Lack Of Old Testament Preaching

This essay was assigned to offer us all an opportunity to examine our stewardship of the Words particularly that large segment of it which we call the Old Testament. In bulk the Old Testament represents three-quarters of the Bible. What does our preaching say about our concern for that 75%? Dr. John Fritz, Missouri Synod homiletician of forty years ago, stated in *The Preacher's Manual*, "Preachers, as a rule, take their text from the New Testament." Just like that!

Could you say it's any different today from the way Dr. Fritz saw it a generation ago? Is it different in your ministry? This evening spend twenty minutes checking your own pulpit record for the last year or two. Will it show that the ratio of Old Testament sermons to New Testament sermons was, perhaps 1:5? Doesn't that sound dangerously much like relegating the Old Testament to an inferior position? Something in me as in you wants instinctively and defensively to deny that allegation. But doesn't a 1:5 ratio argue pretty convincingly that if a pastor has not relegated the Old Testament to a secondary position in esteem he has certainly done so in use?

## Spiritual Seeds Resulting From Ignorance Of The Old Testament

Before we're going to change our homiletical practice with regard to the Old Testament, we must be convinced that we ought to change. What are some of the needs that have arisen in our congregations because of a lack of preaching on Old Testament texts?

There is in the Christian Church today widespread ignorance and misunderstanding of the Old Testament. I suppose it's always been that way. You will recall that even Jesus frequently had to rebuke people for not knowing the Old Testament. Recall his words to Nicodemus: "You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things" (Jn 3:10)? As late as Easter Sunday afternoon Jesus had no task with the Emmaus disciples more important than to begin with Moses and the prophets and to explain what was said in all the Old Testament Scripture concerning himself. Later on that busy day the Savior repeated that labor of love for the handful of frightened disciples in Jerusalem. St. Luke tells us: "He said to them 'This is what I told you While I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that was written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets, and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures'" (Lk 24:44f).

How much of the Old Testament do our parishioners know beyond the passages they once learned in the catechism, and the Bible stories of creation and the flood and the patriarchs they once learned in Sunday School? And how about that deeper knowledge of the Old Testament God looks for in those who teach his people? What part does, say, the Book of Ecclesiastes play in your ministry, or the Prophet Ezekiel? Wicked King Jehoiakim once tried to destroy the scroll of the book of the Prophet Jeremiah by burning it, because he didn't like the message of that scroll. Now we know God had Jeremiah rewrite his prophecy. But for as much attention as we pay to the book of Jeremiah, might Jehoiakim as well have destroyed the document for all time?

Another tragic result of ignoring the Old Testament is the notion that in the Old Testament there was a different way into God's family than there is in the New Testament. What a grotesque distortion of God's words to ancient Israel at Mt. Sinai: "If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (Ex 19:5)! The people to whom God addressed those words already were in God's family by virtue of God's covenant with Abraham, and that was not a law covenant, but a covenant of pure grace. It's downright tragic that well-meaning Christians often place the Old Testament in an adversary position to the New Testament, forgetting that Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Mt 5:17).

Another tragic misunderstanding many Christians who ought to know better have about the Old Testament has roots that go as far back as Marcion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Century heretic. "All that we need to know about God's grace is found ... in the Gospel according to St. Luke and in the ten epistles of St. Paul," Marcion said. That ancient heresy is still spooking around in our congregations and parsonages. In its contemporary form it comes out like this: "Since the New Testament gives us all that we need to know to be at peace with God now and forever, why do we need to concern ourselves particularly with the incomplete and often perplexing message of the Old Testament?"

Still another need which has resulted from the fact that Christian people don't understand the Old Testament well enough is one that has burdened the consciences of multiplied millions. That is the failure (or inability) to distinguish between what God intended to be temporary (until the Savior would come) and what he intended to be the permanent revelation of his holy and immutable will. Much of contemporary Protestantism fails to distinguish between an Old Testament command which God gave to the people of Israel during the period of their spiritual immaturity (Galatians 4) and an Old Testament law which is repeated in the New Testament and is therefore binding on all people for all time. To fail to distinguish between what God intended to be temporary and what he intended to be permanent will inevitably lead to legalism. You've heard of churches and sects which bind the consciences with laws about Sabbath observance and about tithing and about eating blood.

Still another view of the Old Testament which has resulted from our neglect of the Old Testament is what we might call the "cameo" approach. According to this view, there are a number of beautiful Messianic gems which deserve to be shared from the pulpit — the first Gospel promise, of course, the 53<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah, for sure. There are some outstanding psalms we wouldn't want to lose — the 46<sup>th</sup>, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the 130<sup>th</sup>. There are some outstanding examples of human virtue — Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, David's bravery in battle against the giant, Elijah's boldness in opposing the filthy fertility cult ritual Ahab and Jezebel had imported into Israel, Daniel's faithfulness even when lions threatened his life. But apart from these precious cameos, the rest of the Old Testament is for most people pretty much a desolate

wasteland. Theological specialists may find some satisfaction and — who knows? - maybe even some benefit digging around in that wasteland, but the average Christian, even the average pastors won't, and needn't.

One result of our tragic unconcern with the Old Testament is that we have deprived ourselves of the stimulating proclamation of Law and Gospel which is unique to the Old Testament. Who of us has not felt that too often there is a sameness a tiresome monotony to our preaching of Law and Gospel? (And if we have sensed that, isn't it likely that our hearers sensed that long ago?) Are we satisfied that we have preached the message of God's Law properly if we have lashed out at some symptoms of sin and then reminded our flock that the wages of that sort of behavior is death? The Old Testament is rich in evidence of the magnitude of man's rebellion and of the awesome display of the wrath of God, apart from which there really is little point in preaching the Gospel. And do we have the feeling that often the Gospel content of our sermons sounds pretty much the same from week to week? Have we become comfortable with certain ways of expressing the Gospel message, so that we pretty much stick with those familiar patterns? Make no mistake about it: our preaching is the poorer because we have neglected the Old Testament.

And make no mistake about this, either: our congregations are the poorer. Remember Bengel's statement: "As a rule, the way in which the church treats the Scripture corresponds exactly with the condition of the church." The result of persistent neglect of the Old Testament has been a weakened church. A congregation is intended by God to be a disciple factory — nothing more, nothing less. But how can disciples be properly trained when the pulpit menu regularly omits large portions of God's revelation?

### **SUGGESTED REMEDY FOR THE NEED**

I am reasonably sure that the reason why this paper was assigned was not merely to arouse feelings of guilt in the consciences of the brethren. I am dead sure that this is not the purpose for which this essay was written. Its purpose is to offer suggestions and help for using the Old Testament more fully in our preaching.

Absolutely basic if a remedy is to be found for the problems just described is for pastors themselves to become better acquainted with the Old Testament. "It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Co 4:2). What do we understand by faithfulness? In an essay delivered to the 1919 synod convention, Prof. August Pieper made this statement:

"The most important part of true faithfulness in the ministry is finally this, that one cares for his own soul more than for the souls of others. . . Or do you tell yourself that the Lord will be pleased with all your other zeal in the ministry if you are unfaithful in regard to your own soul? Still you care for the souls of others and neglect your own? Didn't Paul have something to say about preaching to others, and himself becoming a castaway? ... Don't you know the word of the Lord, 'The disciple is not above his master?' Can a teacher teach his pupils more than he knows himself? No pastor, professor, or teacher can, as much as in him lies, make better Christians of people than he himself is. ... I may have ever so high an office in the kingdom of God, the highest office is to care for my own soul." (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 62:98f)

I will tell you frankly that I lay it on the consciences of our future pastors that they read through the Scriptures each year. Prof. Pieper used to say that after a man has been in the ministry fifteen years there should be nothing, absolutely nothing in the Scripture that he does

not know. But you tell me how any pastor will arrive at that stage of familiarity with the Bible unless he reads through it regularly and repeatedly. The situation that a Lutheran pastor, who ought to be a man of the Book, is ignorant of the specific content of large portions of the Book, surely dare not be perpetuated. And let this be added: we of the present generation of Lutheran pastors cannot excuse shoddy Bible reading habits by claiming that many Old Testament sections are hard to understand in Elizabethan English. God has in recent years placed a Bible into our hands which is every bit as reliable and as understandable a translation as Luther's Bible was for his countrymen. There are perhaps 1250 chapters in the Bible. Reading an average of four chapters per day will easily take one through the Scriptures each year. How our understanding of the Old Testament — and of the New Testament' — will grow when pastors and people read the Bible, including the Old Testament, regularly and in quantity!

If the people whom we serve are generally to gain a larger understanding of God's revelation, then we're going to have to do what we can to reverse the situation that "Preachers as a rule, take their text from the New Testament." In love for God and for his peoples we'll want to strive for a more balanced pulpit program. I'm not about to suggest that your selection of preaching texts (Old Testament over against New Testament) be proportionate to the size of the two testaments. That would mean choosing three Old Testament texts to every one from the New. But isn't a 1:1 ratio something we might consider or at least 1:2? I am happy to know that at least some pastors using the ILCW selections are alternating between Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel readings preaching on one in turn and using the other two as Scripture readings. In that rotation the Old Testament is preached every third Sunday and read to the congregation the other two Sundays. That procedure simply has to be a blessing for the people of God.

Early in its history the Wisconsin Synod took the official position that the preacher who is to be totally prepared to preach to God's people must be able to translate his sermon text from Hebrew and Greek. You and I both know that many of God's pastors and missionaries don't have skills in the original languages and in their ministry are totally dependent on a translated version of the Scriptures. This may have been because of circumstances perhaps because educational opportunities for learning the languages were not present. But their degree of accountability will be different before the Lord than that of others who have had such opportunities but have failed to use them. Everything God has told us about himself is contained in the vocabulary and syntax of the Holy Scriptures. The pastor who takes his call seriously will therefore simply have to be concerned with the meaning of vocables and with the basic rules of grammar, because the lives and happiness of men and women depend on it.

What all of this boils down to is that simply choosing more of our sermon texts from the Old Testament isn't automatically going to open up God's Word for people unless solid exegesis accompanies proper text selection. Far too often down through the years of church history preachers have approached Old Testament texts with a conviction about what those texts ought to say. The resultant exegetical mischief is not hard to imagine.

Whenever we interpret the Bible, but especially when we preach from the Old Testament, there is the temptation to be superficial and to shortcut our exegetical work. A couple examples. Say you're preaching on 1 Kings 17:7-16, and you're recounting how the Lord directed Elijah to leave Israel and to go to Zarephath, to the home of a widow and her son. There through a miracle of God "the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry." The facts are simple enough, but how shall the preacher interpret them? And how shall he apply them to the congregation? Should he conclude that the basic thought of that text is that God miraculously provided for his prophet? That would be an example of shallow exegesis.

What use did Jesus make of this incident when he referred to it in his sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, Lk 4:18ff? You will recall that Jesus' townspeople refused to accept the message he brought them in the synagogue that day. Jesus responded to their rejection by saying: "No prophet is accepted in his home town." The result was that Jesus left Nazareth. But before he left he warned his fellow townsmen: "I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's times when the sky was shut for three and a half years, and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon," in neighboring Phoenicia, the heathen country lying to the north of Israel. From Jesus' words we see what God's purpose was in sending Elijah away from home to the home of the widow. God was withdrawing his prophet, his messenger, from the people of Israel, who had been rejecting Elijah's message just as the people of Nazareth had rejected Jesus' claim to divine sonship. Sending Elijah out of the country to the widow's home was not just the occasion for a miracle of provision; it was a solemn message of judgment on the unbelief of Israel.

Apply that to the narrative of Jonah. Say you're preaching on a Jonah text for a Mission Festival next fall. What do you make of God's command: "Jonah, go to Nineveh, capital of Assyria and capital of world heathenism and preach!" Is all we see in that command the Savior's desire to bring his Word to the Gentiles, too? Again, that would be superficial exegesis which overlooks the fact that by sending Jonah to the capital city of Assyria God was withdrawing his prophet from Israel, which had turned its back on Jehovah. By showing mercy to Assyria God was actually raising up a scourge for his rebellious people of Israel — again, an awesome act of judgment.

We want our people's knowledge of the Old Testament to be deepened, not only their understanding of Old Testament facts, but of how these facts fit together, of what the New Testament says about them, and of what they say about God's dealings in judgment and mercy. Whether we preach Old Testament or New, we want to be able to say: "This is what the Lord says!" But how can I be confident when I say that unless I have determined on the basis of solid exegesis, what that particular word of God or, for that matter, what that particular action of God meant to the people who were originally involved?

One more example. Say you're preaching on David's victory over Goliath, the Philistine champion who was humiliating and threatening God's people, besides mocking Israel's God. How do you apply that narrative to the hearts and lives of your hearers? Do you perhaps urge your hearers, in their conflicts and difficulties, to say with confidence, as David did: "The LORD will deliver me" (1 Sm 17:37), and then to move ahead in trust in God?

Again, I submit that would be a shallow interpretation of this significant passage and could lead to a sermon that could very possibly be preached in a synagogue. Careful study of 1 Samuel 16 and 17 would remind the preacher that David fought Goliath not just as an Israelite citizen, but as the man whom God had designated to be the next king of Israel, to replace Saul, who had been unfaithful to the Lord. The job of Israel's king, you will remember, was to safeguard God's people. But King Saul hadn't been doing that, and God's people were being intimidated and endangered by heathen neighbors. David, God's designated king, rescued God's people by defeating their enemy. As kings then, David was a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is truly the Son of David — not only according to blood lines but also because he is royalty. Like David, great David's greater Son did the work of a king. He freed us from all our enemies, and his victory was typified by his famous ancestor.

A special danger confronts the preacher when he preaches on Old Testament types. There's the danger of expanding that category arbitrarily. Surely you've met that temptation. You're preaching on Genesis 22, and your sermon recalls how Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac and how patiently Isaac submitted. You'll be tempted to call Isaac a type of Christ. But just because Isaac was an obedient son who faced death innocently yet without complaint, he does not become a type of Christ. Surely we're reminded of Christ as we read the familiar details of Genesis 22, but the simple fact remains that the Scripture does not identify Isaac as a type of Christ, as it does, e.g., the Passover lamb, or the brass snake.

The careful preacher will beware of finding allegories and types in the Old Testament where the Holy Spirit did not indicate any. I remember a pastor years ago who was quite proud of an original Lenten series he had preached on the account of Joseph in Egypt. Though more than 30 years have passed, I can still hear the note of jubilation in his voice as he recalled "I even found an Easter text for that series — Jacob's words: "Joseph, my son, is alive"" I didn't have the heart to tell him that that was not homiletical artistry, but exegesis by the seat of one's pants.

Bernard of Clairvaux, medieval preacher, wrote eighty-six homilies on the Song of Solomon alone. He could do that without difficulty, you see, because he used the allegorical method of Bible interpretation, which allowed him to find in the Song any Christian doctrine he wanted. But the Scripture of the Old Testament is not a wax nose which we may twist in whatever way we want, making the passage say what we feel it ought to say.

The man who wants to preach Old Testament texts properly will ask himself constantly: "In this particular section of his Word, what is God telling me about his plan for sinners?" As the preacher studies the text, he will seek to establish the redemptive history of the passage, in order to answer the question: "Where does Jesus Christ fit here?" As he does that he will be reassured time and again that although outward circumstances among God's people may change from generation to generation and from Old Testament to New Testament, yet God's plan has not changed. In the centuries before Christ came to this planet there was not a different way (perhaps some "law-covenant") by which God let people into his family on the basis of good behavior. There was then, as there is now, only one way — through faith in Jesus Christ.

Then, as now, sinners were saved by faith in a Person, and only by faith in a Person, and only by faith in one Person. When St. Paul wanted to establish the doctrine that the sinner is justified only by faith (Romans 4), he showed from the Old Testament that that's how Abraham was saved. When you look at a tree, it really doesn't make a whole lot of difference whether you stand at ground level and look up from roots and trunk or whether you look from a second story window and view the tree from the top down. It's the same tree, though your vantage point is different.

One of the factors that may at first intimidate the pastor who wants to take seriously his responsibility to preach God's Old Testament revelation to God's people is the sheer bulk of the Old Testament. It offers a mass of material, starting with the record of God's gracious rule in the original world — first with Adam and Eves then with the Sethites, especially Noah. From there it moves on to describe God's rule of grace in the lives of the patriarchs, then in the history of Israel. Besides this vast historical sections, the Old Testament contains liturgical literature, and wisdom literature, and finally the writings of the prophets, who applied Law and Gospel to the situations that confronted them from the time of the establishment of Israel's monarchy to Israel's return from exile in Babylon.

Admittedly there is much in the Old Testament that is preparatory, much that is preliminary to the full revelation of God's truth as we have it in Jesus Christ. But the people we

serve need the opportunity to experience on a continuing basis that the Old Testament teaches the same doctrines as the New Testament does: the total depravity of the sinner by birth; God's eternal election; the initiative of God's grace in the conversion of the sinner; faith as the only proper response of the sinner to God's grace; the deity of the Messiah; his virgin birth; his prophetic ministry; his ministry of compassion; his rejection by his own people; his suffering, death, and resurrection; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost; the worldwide spread of the Gospel; the resurrection to life eternal; and the great Judgment Day which lies ahead on the horizon for all people.

But although the doctrinal content is the same in the two testaments, since God cannot change and since people from the fall have not changed, yet biblical doctrine is in the Old Testament presented in new and largely unfamiliar contexts, with strikingly new emphases. Think, e.g., of the several hundred Old Testament references to the covenant God made with Abraham and with Israel that a precious and pregnant thought (also for our homiletical work) that the Creator has entered into solemn contract with his sinful creatures! What an absolutely mind-boggling thought that the sovereign Lord of the universe has actually placed himself under obligation to us:

“ ‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, Yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the LORD, who has compassion on you” (Is 54:10).

The pastor who intensifies his study of the Old Testament will find all sorts of interesting and valuable fringe benefits for his New Testament preaching as well. He will experience as never before what a thoroughly Jewish book the New Testament really is. Using reference books like Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* will help the preacher to see Old Testament emphases everywhere in the New Testament and to hear Old Testament overtones that our 20<sup>th</sup> Century eyes and ears won't otherwise recognize.

## **RESULTS OF PREACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT**

What results can you expect from a larger investment of study time and pulpit time in the Old Testament? You'll notice the results first of all, in yourself, as your eyes will see wonderful things you hadn't seen previously. You'll be able to describe the awful nature of sin better when you see God's Old Testament people rebel against their covenant God in a thousand ugly ways. You'll thrill to the amazing grace of God as you see Law and Gospel reenacted in detail a thousand times over and in every Old Testament book. You'll learn to appreciate Luther's statement: “There isn't a word in the New Testament which doesn't look back into the Old Testament, in which it has previously been foretold.”

But you won't be the only beneficiary of your larger interest in the Old Testament. The people who hear you preach will grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Savior as they hear familiar doctrines drawn from totally unfamiliar contexts and presented on unfamiliar backgrounds. They will learn much about God and about themselves from the detailed biographies of patriarchs and kings and prophets (biographies incidentally, which we simply don't have in the New Testament).

It will take work to preach the Old Testament properly. But there are treasures there for the taking. (The brethren will experience that at this conference, and, I hope, at future conferences). Providing access to that treasure store will benefit not only you, but those who hear you.