

IX 9Marks BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

HOW
THE CHURCH
FAITHFULLY
TEACHES THE
GOSPEL



NICK ROARK & ROBERT CLINE

“This little book packs a big punch. Absorb its contents, and feel its effect for years to come.”

Constantine R. Campbell, Associate Professor of New Testament,
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“Faithful preaching and teaching not only zooms in on a particular text but also zooms out and considers the storyline of the whole Bible. Nick Roark and Robert Cline show how biblical theology is essential for the church, for preaching, and for living. They survey the big picture of the Scriptures and show us some wrong turns that are commonly made. A very helpful resource for pastors, teachers, and laypeople.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of
New Testament Interpretation and Professor of Biblical Theology,
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“I love biblical theology, but I don’t always love biblical theology books. Too often, they are so technically written that they miss the majority of believers. This book is an exception. The authors not only define, defend, and describe biblical theology but also do so in a way that is accessible to all believers. This book is simple while addressing complex ideas, short but packed with information, and theoretical yet filled with practical examples of doing biblical theology. It is both a call to do biblical theology and a handbook for doing it well. I finished it with a deeper desire to see Jesus in the Word and to help my church members do the same.”

Chuck Lawless, Dean of Doctoral Studies and Vice President for
Spiritual Formation, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary;
author, *Spiritual Warfare: Biblical Truth for Victory* and *Putting on the Armor*

“There is not a single effective biblical expositor today who does not employ biblical theology to make sense of his text and to deliver its Christ-centered message. Roark and Cline explain in a very clear and direct way how biblical theology helps the church and pastors to understand and proclaim the big story from Scriptures.”

Augustus Lopes, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Goiânia, Brazil

“Wow—this short book bundles a library of wisdom for grasping God’s biblical storyline and faithfully teaching the Word! The authors have done us all a great favor by distilling heavy biblical concepts and making them simple, user-friendly, and transferable. This is the kind of book you want to hand out to a Sunday school teacher, an aspiring pastor, or a missionary candidate. Well-meaning Bible teachers often take the easy path of proof texting to make a ‘practical lesson,’ but miss the larger theme, the glorious centerpiece of the passage. A wonderful tool for keeping me on track as a missionary and for teaching new converts how to study and teach the Word, this small book should be translated into many languages!”

David L. Frazier, Executive Director, Equipping Servants International; author, *Mission Smart*

“This brief book explains important theological concepts in a clear, faithful, simple way. It is perfect for those in the church who might find an in-depth academic book a challenge, but who want to understand sound theology and grasp the biblical concepts needed in order to teach the gospel well. This is an excellent resource, and I can’t wait to recommend it to my women’s ministry team.”

Abi Byrd, former missionary to the Balkans; Bible Instructor, The Simeon Trust; Deacon of Women’s Ministry, Loudoun Valley Baptist Church, Purcellville, Virginia

“A believer is measured by faithfulness, and it is imperative that a believer know how to be faithful to the Word of God, our one timeless authority. Through explanation and example, Nick and Robert’s book simply and helpfully instructs believers on how to rightly understand individual biblical passages while always keeping in mind the big picture that Christ is the goal and end of all Scripture. I highly recommend it as an invaluable companion for any believer desiring to hear the words, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant.’”

Ndagi Job Goshi, international bivocational church planter

“Biblical theology is a frequently ignored subject, despite being indispensable to understanding the entire Bible. The authors of this excellent book realize the importance of this topic for comprehending the storyline of redemptive history. If you are looking for a resource that explains and applies biblical theology well, this is your book. It is biblical, well written, easy to understand, practical, brief yet not superficial, full of information, and extremely helpful for preaching and pastoral ministry. I’m amazed at how much solid instruction was put into such a short book.”

Miguel Núñez, Senior Pastor, International Baptist Church of Santo Domingo; President and Founder, Wisdom and Integrity Ministries

"As an elder of a church located in one of the major global crossroads of the world, I long to equip Christians who will return to challenging places where they often face persecution and false teaching. Biblical theology is a critical tool to help Christians protect and proclaim the gospel. I am immensely grateful for this book and excited to see it used to strengthen the global church. It strikes the perfect balance of breadth and depth, easily translates across cultural and language backgrounds, and will help all Christians better see, celebrate, and communicate the gospel."

Andrew Gizinski, Elder, RAK Evangelical Church, Ras Al Khaimah, United Arab Emirates

"Nick and Robert have accomplished something rare in a field this broad. They have succinctly clarified the core of biblical theology without oversimplifying the process. Every Christian will benefit from the numerous examples of how an informed biblical theology transforms how we read, apply, and teach the Bible. This is a trustworthy map down the Emmaus road, where the discovery of Christ in all the Scriptures delights the heart."

Chip Bugnar, author, *Grace beyond the Veil*

"In this book full of powerful, illuminating illustrations, Roark and Cline argue convincingly that seeing how the storyline of the Bible is all about Jesus Christ equips every believer to serve him in line with the purpose of God. Read this book and see for yourself! The phrase *biblical theology* may give you the impression that this is a textbook only for Bible colleges or pastoral training. But here is a must-read book for every Christian because we are all meant to be stewards of the church of Christ."

Conrad Mbewe, Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church; Chancellor, The African Christian University, Lusaka, Zambia

"Trying to put together the various historical epochs and literary genres of the sixty-six books of Scripture into one consistent whole can seem like a daunting task. In this eminently readable and practical book, Roark and Cline help us to see that this difficult task might not be so hard after all; for, as Jesus says, all Scripture points to him. The authors are to be commended for writing a book to help Bible teacher and student alike to understand the point of God's Word and protect us from applying it in wrong ways to our lives and our churches."

Shawn D. Wright, Professor of Church History, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Pastor of Leadership Development, Clifton Baptist Church, Louisville

"As a pastor I'm often asked for a brief book that provides the Bible's storyline and unity, centered on the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. From now on, this book is my answer. But this work does more than describe biblical theology; it shows the reader how this often neglected discipline can guard us against numerous errors—in both our interpretation of Scripture and the practice of the church."

Lee Tankersley, Pastor, Cornerstone Community Church, Jackson, Tennessee

"I have been on the lookout for a book on biblical theology that I could confidently hand to any person in my church. I have finally found it. This book is an answer to prayer."

Jason Meyer, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

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9Marks: Building Healthy Churches

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Jonathan Leeman

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BUILDING HEALTHY CHURCHES

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HOW
THE CHURCH
FAITHFULLY
TEACHES
THE GOSPEL

NICK ROARK AND ROBERT CLINE

 **CROSSWAY®**

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To the saints
of Franconia Baptist Church.
By God's grace, may we adore and proclaim
Christ from all the Scriptures.

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SERIES PREFACE

Do you believe it's your responsibility to help build a healthy church? If you are a Christian, we believe that it is.

Jesus commands you to make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Jude says to build yourselves up in the faith (Jude 20–21). Peter calls you to use your gifts to serve others (1 Pet. 4:10). Paul tells you to speak the truth in love so that your church will become mature (Eph. 4:13, 15). Do you see where we are getting this?

Whether you are a church member or leader, the Building Healthy Churches series of books aims to help you fulfill such biblical commands and so play your part in building a healthy church. Another way to say it might be, we hope these books will help you grow in loving your church like Jesus loves your church.

9Marks plans to produce a short, readable book on each of what Mark has called nine marks of a healthy church, plus a few more on sound doctrine, prayer, and missions. Watch for books on expositional preaching, biblical theology, the gospel, conversion, evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, and church leadership.

Local churches exist to display God's glory to the nations. We do that by fixing our eyes on the gospel of Jesus Christ, trusting him for salvation, and then loving one another with

Series Preface

God's own holiness, unity, and love. We pray the book you are holding will help.

With hope,
Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman
series editors

THE NEED FOR BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

SEEING THE POINT OF THE STORY

When I (Nick) was in elementary school, one of my classmates gave a book report about a story written by C. S. Lewis featuring four children, a lion king, a white witch, and a hidden magical land accessed through a wardrobe. I was mesmerized. So I purchased *The Chronicles of Narnia* for myself and read them with pleasure. But years later, after my conversion to Christ, I realized I had been missing the author's obvious intentions to point his readers to Jesus.

It's possible to read a story, find it interesting, and entirely miss its point. You might focus too much on the scenery or the minor characters. You might read only paragraphs at a time, or aimlessly skip from one place to another. You might even try to cobble together the story's plot or worldview from a variety of disconnected sections. If you do any of these things, it's more than likely you'll misunderstand the story, both its hero and its major themes.

The Bible is a divinely inspired story. It tells its story

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though a collection of stories, songs, poetry, wisdom sayings, Gospels, letters, and apocalyptic literature. Together, these various forms tell a true story about God's saving work in history. The Bible contains sixty-six books written by a variety of authors. These authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit, who used their unique personalities and contexts to create for us the canon of Scripture, with its single main point and plot line.

Christians recognize the Bible's divine authority. They even read and study it daily for years. And yet, many still miss the point. Jesus addresses some people like this in John 5:39–40: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.”

It's possible to honor the Scriptures yet read and use them incorrectly by failing to see the big picture God has designed. Thankfully, though, the Bible's author left us some clear clues about the point of his story. Here's one major clue from Jesus Christ himself:

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:44–49)

Jesus explains two things in this text. First, he makes the shocking statement that all of the Old Testament—from the Pentateuch to the Prophets to the Psalms—was actually written about him; in other words, Jesus identifies himself as the promised Messiah. Second, he says that his followers will be witnesses of these things to all nations, that is, to all peoples in all places.

Simply put, you won't understand the story of the Bible unless you see that *it's all about Jesus!* From Genesis to Revelation, Jesus is the Hero and the point of the story. What's more, you won't understand who Jesus is unless you understand the larger story that's all about him! Jesus is the interpretative key to the Bible, which means a careful Bible reader will find him in the beginning, middle, and end of this story.

God has revealed for us in the Bible the King's purposes, the King's plans, and the King's promises. As they're worked out in history, we need to pay attention to this story and read it as Jesus says we should. God's story is a grand story—the grandest of them all, in fact—and it's centered on his plan of redemption in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

But to read the Bible faithfully, we need the proper tools. The discipline of biblical theology is one of those helpful tools.

1. *Biblical theology helps clarify the Bible's main purpose.* Some people approach God's Word as if it were a collection of independent stories, or an assortment of advice and counsel, or even a universal cookbook with recipes for "the good life" scattered across its sixty-six books. But these approaches fail to bring to light the central purpose of Scripture.

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In the Bible, the triune God explains who he is and what he is like and how he's at work throughout history by his Spirit and in his Son, Jesus Christ the King, and how we ought to glorify him in this world. Biblical theology helps us to grasp this main purpose by looking at each passage of Scripture in light of the whole Bible so that we understand how every part of Scripture is related to Jesus.

2. *Biblical theology helps guard and guide the church.* Reading Scripture rightly means knowing where each book fits into its overarching narrative. And knowing the overarching narrative helps us read and understand accurately each event, character, or lesson that's been given to us as part of God's progressively revealed Word. Understanding the whole story of Scripture clarifies who Jesus Christ is and what his gospel is.

God has promised to rescue a people from every tribe and nation and tongue for his own glory through his Son and by his Spirit. These redeemed people are members of Christ's body, the church. What is the church of Jesus Christ supposed to be and supposed to do? Jesus said to his followers—those who've repented of their sins and trusted in him alone—that the Scriptures testify “repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). So the proclamation of Jesus Christ ought to be at the heart of the church's mission to disciple the nations. In this way, biblical theology guards the church from the deadly error of proclaiming a false gospel and guides the church toward keeping the proclamation of the true gospel as the centerpiece of its mission to the world for the praise of God's glory.

3. *Biblical theology helps us in our evangelistic outreach.* Sharing the good news with those who are unfamiliar with Christianity requires explaining much more than “four spiritual laws” or the “Romans road.” People first need to grasp that the Christian worldview accompanies a total transformation of mind-set. In our evangelism, we must start with God and creation to see what’s gone wrong. From there, we’re able to follow what God has been doing throughout history, which will help us discover why he sent Jesus and why that matters today. Not until we rightly understand these past events in their proper contexts will we be equipped to uncover what God is doing right now and what he’ll do in the future.

4. *Biblical theology helps us read, understand, and teach the Bible the way Jesus said we should.* Jesus himself says in Luke 24 that he is Scripture’s interpretive key. So if we fail to read and understand Scripture in a way that leads us to Jesus, then we will miss the point of the Bible, and as a result we will teach others to commit the same error.

WHEN CHURCHES MISS THE POINT

The bottom line is this: missing the point of the Bible’s story produces false gospels and false churches. Let’s consider a few examples of this kind of error that biblical theology helps us to avoid.

The Prosperity-Gospel Church

Let us introduce you to Jonathan. He reads his Bible daily and prays often but has never read through a complete book of the

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Bible. Look in his Bible and you'll find circled verses in the Old Testament and underlined pages in the New.

His wife, Rebekah, has memorized quite an impressive array of Bible verses and is teaching these verses to her children, one by one. Jonathan, Rebekah, and their young family are part of a local church in their city in Africa (though this could be Asia, Europe, or America, for that matter). When I asked to hear some of Rebekah's memorized verses, she recited Mark 11:24: "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Then she said, "That's what Abraham did, so that's what I do."

A bit disturbed, I (Robert) decided to reach out to one of her pastors. When I asked him what he thought the main message the Bible might be, he said: "Oh, that's easy. God sent Jesus to give the abundant life by faith to all who believe. God will give us this life now with all the riches and blessings that Jesus deserves if only we have faith. We can create our own blessings, when we pray in faith like Abraham did."

The Civil-Gospel Church

Visiting some believers in another city, this time in the United States, I (Robert) asked them to tell me what the message of the Bible is. Their answers went something like this:

Well, America is a Christian nation, God's chosen nation like Israel, a city on a hill. God has blessed this nation, but like it says in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

They continued:

God and country, that's what my church is all about. This is supposed to be a Christian nation, but now we're told we can't have the Ten Commandments on the walls of our public schools! If Americans would just be good, moral people like Abraham, Moses, or David, then we'd all prosper and enjoy the safety and comfort of God's blessing.

The Soup-Kitchen Church

John has recently moved to the city and is part of a network of churches aimed at serving the poor. His primary job is managing a food bank. John's church desires to obey the Bible's command to seek justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Mic. 6:8). John admits that the "accent" of his church's teaching is definitely more about mobilizing for what we should do for God than about the message of what God has done for us in Christ. "We ought to be all about relieving suffering wherever we are," John says. "Feeding 'the least of these' is what we're known for as a church. What could possibly be wrong with that?"

The Immorality-Affirming Church

Fundamentally, biblical theology assists faithful Christ followers in recognizing and refuting erroneous interpretations of Scripture that conflict with the overall narrative of the Bible. Cynthia is a young college student from a Christian home. She's always been taught the Bible and knows its big-picture story well. She has even completed a year's worth of New Testament Greek studies. Her worldview is solidly Christian, but

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lately she's been confused as she meets professing Christians who are openly gay and also very kind, generous, and loving.

"How could the Bible be against such people?" she wonders.

She's read articles by biblical scholars who question the English translation of key texts traditionally used to explain why homosexual practice is sinful. At this point, she can't help but ask, "Since there are no verses in the Bible explicitly forbidding same-sex marriage, what if two women really love each other?"

CONCLUSION

These are but a few problems biblical theology will help Christians and local churches address. There are others as well. As this book progresses, we'll see how biblical theology helps us get the story right by putting King Jesus at the start, in the center, and at the end of the Bible's one true story.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's begin by answering the question, What is biblical theology?

WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

FOLLOWING THE MAP OF SCRIPTURE STRAIGHT TO JESUS

It would be safe to say that I (Nick) am a bit directionally challenged. My friends and family can all testify that I've never been great at navigating by my own sense of direction. Because of this directional shortcoming, there is comfort in knowing that all I need to do to arrive at my desired destination is to correctly follow a map.

We've seen how missing the point of the Bible's story produces false gospels and false churches. What we need now is a framework for understanding the whole Bible. Biblical theology provides that framework because it guides our reading of the Bible and therefore guards against bad interpretation. Biblical theology is an approach to reading the whole story of the Bible while keeping our focus on the main point of Scripture, Jesus Christ. In other words, biblical theology is the scriptural road map that leads us to Jesus.

But how do we *know* Jesus is the main point of the whole Bible? Because he tells us so.

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THE GREATEST BIBLE STUDY EVER

Imagine being with the disciples when they met the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. This amazing scene is recorded for us in Luke 24. What transpired was quite literally the greatest Bible study ever.

Two disciples were walking along the road to a village seven miles from Jerusalem. Luke tells us that “while they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (24:15–16). The disciples then shared with Jesus the amazing things that had just happened in Jerusalem, things

concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning, and when they did not find his body, they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see. (24:19–24)

Jesus responded:

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And

beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. (24:25–27)

Later on, Jesus said to his disciples,

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (24:44–47)

In other words, when Jesus surveyed the Old Testament Scriptures—the Book of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms or Writings—he intended for his followers to understand that all of these books were written about *him*. This is how Luke tells it: “He interpreted to them in *all* the Scriptures the things concerning *himself*.”

Jesus is crystal clear. It’s foolish to read the Old Testament and not understand that Jesus is the point. The whole story of the Bible is about him. The Old Testament promises and points forward to the Messiah and his mission, and the New Testament unpacks the fulfillment of the glorious promises in Christ.

The story of Scripture, then, is all about God’s King and his gracious rule and reign; it’s all about the forgiveness of sins that King has won for his people, who hail from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. The whole story of the

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Scriptures, rightly understood, focuses on Jesus Christ from beginning to end.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL THEOLOGY?

We should briefly explain what we mean when we use the phrase “biblical theology.” If we believe the Bible to be God’s inspired and inerrant Word, shouldn’t we aim for all of our theology to be “biblical”? Yes, of course. But when we use the phrase “biblical theology” in this book, we intend something more specific.

On the one hand, systematic theology begins with key topics (God, man, sin, Christ, salvation, etc.) and then searches the Scriptures to see what they teach about them. On the other hand, biblical theology attempts to read the whole story of the Bible and asks how each part relates to the whole.

Biblical theology is a way of reading the Bible as one story by one divine author that culminates in who Jesus Christ is and what he has done, so that every part of Scripture is understood in relation to him. Biblical theology helps us understand the Bible as one big book with lots of little books that tell one big story. The Hero and centerpiece of that story, from cover to cover, is Jesus Christ.

Biblical theology is for the church, begins with the Bible, and ends with King Jesus and his church.

Biblical Theology Is for the Church

While the discipline of biblical theology can get highly technical and advanced, even the earliest Christians valued biblical theology and understood its usefulness for the church.

In Acts 17, we read that Paul and Silas shared the gospel in Thessalonica and then spent time proclaiming the Word of God to those in the Jewish synagogue in Berea. Paul “reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ’” (17:2–3). What happened? Many of these Jews believed, along with “not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men” (17:12).

The Bereans listened to Paul’s reasoning, his explanations, and his proofs from the Old Testament. They heard him proclaim that it was necessary for God’s promised King, Jesus Christ, “to suffer and to rise from the dead” (Acts 17:3). The apostle Paul helped his listeners to understand how Scripture’s storyline centered on and culminated in Jesus. He provided a map of Scripture that led them to Christ. And, by God’s grace, many of the Bereans believed.

But notice: the Bereans didn’t just take Paul’s word for it. We’re told by Luke, the author of the book of Acts, “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). The Bereans received the word eagerly, and they examined the Scriptures daily to confirm what they’d been taught.

The early Christians didn’t understand the work of biblical theology as something only for apostles. They didn’t think that biblical theology was reserved for professional academics at prestigious seminaries. Instead, they understood that it was their responsibility to search the Scriptures and develop

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a faithful framework for understanding how the Bible's story centers and culminates on Jesus.

They understood that biblical theology is for the church. If you are in Christ, then biblical theology is for you.

Biblical Theology Begins with the Bible

Biblical theology begins with the prayerful and careful reading of the Bible. We come to the Bible humbly, seeking to understand its grand story on its own terms.

The Bible is amazingly diverse. It's one book filled with lots of little books by multiple authors who wrote at different times, employing multiple genres. So when we read the Bible, we discover all kinds of diversity: narrative, poetry, law, wisdom, prophecy, epistles, and Gospels. Seeking to tie together all of these diverse books, written at different times in different places to varying audiences, can feel like a daunting task. That's because it is!

And yet, we shouldn't feel as though this task is impossible. Biblical theology is indeed possible because the whole Bible is one God-breathed book: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16). The unity of the Bible's story is grounded upon the Bible's ultimate author, God himself.

Look at what the apostle Peter says about the Bible: "No prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:20–21). If the Lord himself breathed out these books, then we should prayerfully and carefully read them, seeking to understand his grand purpose and plan.

Imagine that each book of the Bible shines like a star. But it's only when you zoom out far enough that you begin to see that these stars form a giant and glorious constellation. Biblical theology analyzes and synthesizes each star, and then zooms out to view the breathtaking panoramic constellation of divine glory.

And what's at the center of this glorious constellation? God the Father sending his Son through the Spirit to win a people for his own glory.

Biblical Theology Ends with King Jesus and His Church

The whole church has the privilege of practicing biblical theology. We must prayerfully and carefully read all of the Bible's parts to make sense of it as a whole. As we read and reread the whole story of the Bible, what becomes clear is Scripture's laser-sharp focus on Jesus.

Hear the words of Paul: "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). Christ himself, the promised King, is the one who holds everything together, including the grand story of Scripture itself. The Old Testament points forward and prepares the way, as it were, for the coming of the King. The New Testament proclaims the arrival of the King and his mission to all nations. Biblical theology, therefore, ends with King Jesus and the fulfillment of his promises to rescue and redeem for himself a people for his praise.

CONCLUSION

Biblical theology helps us understand how the glorious map of Scripture points toward and centers on the risen and reigning

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King, Jesus Christ, and his blood-bought people. Just like those disciples on the Emmaus road, we want our eyes and our minds opened (Luke 24:31, 45) to recognize Jesus in all the Scriptures in order that we might love him with all of our hearts from all the Scriptures (Luke 24:32). If we're reading the road map of Scripture correctly, it should always lead us to Jesus and who we are as his people. Let's spend some time now studying the Bible's map together and see for ourselves how it's all about the King and his purposes to gain glory by redeeming a people for himself.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE'S BIG STORY?

Part 1

The story of Scripture is God's story. It's the story of God the King. The Bible begins and ends with a glorious God, one who is the sovereign Ruler and Creator all of things (Genesis 1; Revelation 20–22), one who has existed for eternity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God, and God alone, rules and reigns over his creation. This world, our world, is a world that he created good. It's his world and he rules over all of it. The story of Scripture is the King's story. It's all about him and all about his glory.

And it starts at the beginning of everything.

THE KING CREATES AND COVENANTS

God's story begins with a declaration of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). God created everything that is, and as the Maker of all things, he reigns over all.

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The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all. (Ps. 103:19)

By simply speaking his mighty words, the King fashioned and filled his creation with lands and seas and plants and creatures, preparing a good place for the pinnacle of his creation to dwell with him. Genesis records it like this:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Gen. 1:27)

Unlike other creatures, humans are created by God for a unique relationship with him. As the crown of the King's creation, Adam and Eve were created in his image, and they enjoyed dwelling in the bountiful presence of their King. God intended his image bearers to spread his image throughout all the earth: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen. 1:28).

Adam in particular was to serve as God's superintendent, exercising dominion—beginning in the garden and extending that rule through the entire earth. His job description is given in Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." Just as a priest would later guard God's tabernacle, Adam worshiped and served God by guarding the garden (Num. 3:8). He was to stop any unclean thing from entering God's holy place.

Together, Adam and Eve were created to enjoy God's good

creation according to God's word. From the very beginning, we see the covenantal relationship between God and his people. Even though the word *covenant* doesn't appear in Genesis 1–2, several clues indicate that God created humanity to relate to him covenantally (see Rom. 5:12–21).

That sounds nice, but what exactly *is* a covenant? That's not a word we use very much these days. Simply put, a covenant is “a solemn commitment, guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both covenanting parties, sealed with an oath.”¹ God's instructions to Adam were crystal clear: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” (Gen. 2:15–17). God provided Adam with a list of duties and commitments, and he promised blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

When you preach or teach Genesis 1, it's easy to lose focus on what's of primary importance. Consider making these types of connections:

- The eternal God who created all things (Gen. 1:1) will one day make all things new (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:5).
- Teaching and preaching about Adam connects ultimately to the last Adam, Jesus Christ (Romans 5).
- The Son of God is the one through whom God created all things (Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:1–3).

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The Lord binds his people by his verbal commitment, his oath, his covenant. Later in the Bible's story, we discover that covenants are designed to further establish and expand God's kingly rule and reign. But as the Bible's story begins, everything is wonderful in the King's world.

THE KING CURSES

The story of Scripture began as a happy story. But the bliss of Genesis 1–2 was shattered in Genesis 3. Instead of guarding and protecting God's place and people, Adam failed. Instead of obeying the voice of their good Creator and King, Adam and Eve foolishly obeyed the deceitful words of a creature. For the first time in our story, we meet the villain, the Serpent, who would later be known as Satan, the Devil, the Evil One, and the deceiver. The Serpent deceived Eve. He asked her, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" (3:1).

Until this point in the story, only God, in his manifold wisdom, had determined what was good in his creation (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 21, 25, 31; 2:17–18). But the Serpent deceived Eve by denying God's word and doubting God's goodness. The Serpent tempted her to rebel against her good and wise King:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:6)

Instead of wisely trusting the good word of their good King, Adam and Eve rebelled against him and listened to voice of the Serpent.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

Connect the cosmic curse of Genesis 3 to the Serpent-crushing seed of Eve, who redeemed us from the curse by becoming a curse for us (Gal. 3:13), and because of whom “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21). As the great hymn says, Jesus will make his blessings flow “far as the curse is found.”*

It is easy to preach a sermon from Genesis 3 and make it all about resisting temptation: “Adam was tempted and failed. How can we face temptation and not fail like Adam did?” This is moralistic preaching, like saying: “Adam was bad. Don’t be like Adam.” The truth, according to Romans 5, is that we did, in fact, fall in Adam. He was our covenantal representative and he failed, and we are guilty in him. We need a faithful Adam, one who is tempted and proves to be a faithful Son. That faithful Son, of course, is Jesus (Luke 4:1–13).

* Isaac Watts, “Joy to the World! The Lord Is Come” (1719).

The consequences of Adam and Eve’s sin were comprehensively catastrophic. Blame shifting soon followed: “The woman whom *you* gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). The curse envisioned strife between man and wife. The bitter fruits of their cosmic rebellion would include death, judgment, and exile. Instead of blessing, God cursed them because of their rebellion (Gen. 3:14–19). Yet, even on this dark day, a glimmer of future hope remained. The Lord promised that a seed of Eve would one day crush the Serpent. The Lord said,

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I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

This war between the Serpent and the seed of Eve would continue to rage until the end of the biblical story. In the meantime, because of their rebellion, Adam and Eve were banished from the garden and sent east into exile, away from the presence of the King. Life under the curse was not how life in God's good world was intended to be.

THE KING JUDGES

Sadly, life east of Eden went from bad to worse. With the entrance of sin into the world, things had gone horribly wrong in the King's good world. Just a few chapters after creation we read: "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). The inclinations of the human heart no longer sought to honor God; rather, men and women desired to pursue evil, and "only evil continually."

But a man named Noah found favor in God's sight (Gen. 6:8). The Lord determined to judge the world through a flood and to show mercy toward Noah and his family (Genesis 6–8). Through one man a people were saved. Afterward, God made a covenant with Noah, promising never to destroy the world this way again. The Lord said, "I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters

of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (Gen. 9:11).

But even after the flood, the worldwide rebellion against the King continued and the problem of the human heart remained. Instead of honoring and reflecting and magnifying the name of the King, people sought to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4). So God scattered them because he had other plans. He would make his name known throughout the whole world, and he would do so through his chosen man: Abraham.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

Even in judgment, God shows mercy. The rescue of Noah and his family from the flood teaches clearly that God saves those who trust in him, even if they are few in number (1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5). God preserves a remnant of his people even when it appears that all have turned away from him (Rom. 11:2–6).

THE KING BLESSES

God's plan of spreading his glory throughout the whole world seemed to have been thwarted by the Serpent and by sin. Yet the King didn't only judge. He also blessed. The Lord called and blessed a man from Ur of the Chaldees named Abram (later known as Abraham). God promised to make this man's name great and to bless the world through him and his offspring. God planned to create a people through Abraham, a peculiar people and a holy nation. And God planned to bless the world through the seed of Abraham.

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I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12:2-3)

Even kings, the Lord said, would come through Abraham's family (Gen. 17:6, 16). The Lord promised to bless Abraham and his family with both dominion and dynasty. And he solemnly sealed these promises with Abraham through yet another covenant (Genesis 15).

But there was a glaring problem in all of this: Abraham was old and his wife, Sarai (later called Sarah), was barren. From a human perspective, any prospect of Abraham having a son seemed doubtful at best. Nevertheless, Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6).

God kept his promise, and a miracle child was born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. From this point on in the Old Testament, the rest of the story focuses on Abraham's family: Isaac (Gen. 22:17-18), Jacob (Gen. 35:11), and Jacob's twelve sons (Genesis 49). Even though Genesis ends with Abraham's family outside the Promised Land, the future was bright. Jacob, Abraham's grandson, also known as Israel, prophesied that in the last days a "lion king" would come from the line of his son, Judah. He said of this King:

The scepter shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,

until tribute comes to him;
and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.
(Gen. 49:10)

Would this future King be the one to crush the Serpent and restore God's blessing to the world and reign over a people for God's glory?

Preaching and Teaching Tip

When you preach or teach from Genesis 12, make sure you emphasize God's saving plan for the whole world, for all peoples, through faith in Jesus Christ. God's heart to bless "all nations" didn't begin in the Great Commission of Matthew 28. God's plan from the very beginning was to bless the world and for Adam and Eve to multiply and fill the world with image bearers who would display his glory. And in and through Abraham, God would make a name for his own sake, and Abraham would become the father of all who believe (Gal. 3:7–9). God promised Jacob, Abraham's descendant, "a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body" (Gen. 35:11). God would fulfill his promises to Abraham fully in the seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16).

THE KING RESCUES

God had promised to bless Abraham and his family. He'd promised to make them more numerous than the stars of the heavens. This promise began to be fulfilled as Israel multiplied in Egypt: "The people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong,

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so that the land was filled with them” (Ex. 1:7). But just like in Eden, God’s plan was opposed. The people of Israel were enslaved by Pharaoh and suffered under the reign of a cruel king (Exodus 1–2). They cried out to their true King to rescue them from bondage—and God “remembered” his covenant promises (Ex. 2:23–24).

Preaching and Teaching Tip

The exodus of Israel from bondage in Egypt points forward to an even greater exodus of God’s people through the cross of Christ (Col. 1:12–14). The Passover lamb points forward to the perfect, spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). Tim Keller says:

Imagine you were in Egypt just after that first Passover. If you stopped Israelites in those days and said, “Who are you and what is happening here?” they would say, “I was a slave, under a sentence of death, but I took shelter under the blood of the lamb and escaped that bondage, and now God lives in our midst and we are following Him to the Promised Land.” That is exactly what Christians say today. *

* Timothy Keller, *King’s Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 172.

So the Lord revealed himself to Moses (Exodus 3) and raised him up to be a deliverer for the Israelites. And through Moses, God rescued his people from Egypt by his mighty hand *and* by the blood of a spotless lamb (Exodus 12). The climactic deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea caused all the people to celebrate their rescue (Exodus 14). In response to this mighty

work of salvation, Moses led the people of Israel in a song praising their mighty King:

Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

.....

The LORD will reign forever and ever. (Ex. 15:11, 18)

The rescue of God's people from their bondage in Egypt displays to the whole world that there is none like the Lord. He is King and he will reign forever.

THE KING COMMANDS

After rescuing his people from Egypt, the Lord brought them to Mount Sinai, just as he had promised. When he revealed himself to Moses, the Lord said: "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" (Ex. 3:12). Before leading them into the good land that the Lord had promised to Abraham, God revealed his good words to his people at Sinai.

Israel, whom God called his firstborn son (Ex. 4:22), was to be a kind of priestly representative to the world, just like Adam. Notice what the Lord said of them: "If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:4-6). God intended the holiness of Israel to reflect the holiness of their King: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your

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God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). By trusting and obeying the Lord’s good words, Israel would be a unique people who displayed the wisdom of their King to all the peoples of the earth. By keeping and doing the commandments of the King, the people of Israel would display God’s wisdom to a watching world (Deut. 4:4–6).

But just like Adam, Israel proved to be a faithless son who disobeyed God’s good words. Even while Moses was receiving God’s revelation atop Mount Sinai, the people were busy making idols for themselves at the bottom of the mountain (Exodus 32). The King made a covenant with his people, and they violated it.

Moses longed for God’s presence to go with Israel into the Promised Land, so he interceded on their behalf (Exodus 34). God pledged that his presence would not depart from Israel, but he still cast judgment on the present wicked generation. They were destined to wander in the wilderness for forty years before setting foot in the Land of Promise.

Throughout this period of wandering, the King dwelt in the midst of the people in the tabernacle and patiently provided for them every step of the way. But once again, in contrast with Abraham, Israel refused to walk by faith (Num. 14:11; Deut. 1:32; 9:23; Psalm 95), so much so that as Moses neared the end of his life, he wasn’t hopeful that Israel would obey the Lord after he was gone (Deut. 31:29).

At this point in the story, it’s clear the heart problem that had plagued humanity since Adam’s rebellion remained (Deut. 31:20–21). It’s also clear that if anything was ever going to change, the unbelief of God’s people must be atoned for, and their hearts must be transformed.

But how? Hope for this change lay in the future. The re-

peated atoning sacrifices commanded by the Lord at Sinai pointed forward to the needed future, final sacrifice. And even Moses looked forward to a day when the King would circumcise the hearts of his people (Deut. 30:6), when the Spirit of God would be poured out on them all (Num. 11:29).

Preaching and Teaching Tip

The sacrificial system described in the Mosaic law provides a trajectory in the biblical story that arcs all the way to Jesus, the sinless sacrifice who made propitiation for the sins of his people (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10).

When teaching on passages detailing the tabernacle (Exodus 25), consider making Christ-centered connections with other portions of Scripture that deal with God's dwelling with his people. This theme spans the entire length of the biblical story, beginning with Eden. You can trace this theme from the tabernacle to the Jerusalem temple, and then to God himself, who "tabernacled" with his people in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made flesh (John 1:14).

In him, the church has become the new temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:4–5). One day God will dwell with his people in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21–22). The Most Holy Place, the cube-shaped room in the temple, gives way to a city that's shaped like a cube (Rev. 21:16). The whole city will be a kind of Holy of Holies and will be open to all of God's people, "for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev. 21:22).

THE KING LEADS

After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people are at last led by God, through his servant Joshua, into the land he promised to give them (Gen. 13:15; Ex. 3:8). The Lord said to

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Joshua: “Arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses” (Josh. 1:2–3). God demonstrated to his people that he is an utterly trustworthy King:

Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. . . . Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass. (Josh. 21:43–45; cf. 23:14)

But as the story unfolds in the book of Joshua, it becomes clear that even though Israel was in the Promised Land, the people’s hearts remained in the world. Throughout the conquest of Canaan, the threat of judgment and exile hung over Israel. Israel knew that if they transgressed God’s covenant, they’d be punished.

After the death of Joshua, instead of heeding his warning and obeying God’s words, Israel did what they deemed right in their own eyes—and wickedness abounded. The writer of Judges summarizes it this way:

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. (Judg. 2:11–13)

Even though they knew the Lord was their King, Israel re-

jected him and desired a king, just like the surrounding nations (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Not surprisingly, the people's choice, Saul, wasn't God's choice. The Lord desired a king after his own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22), so he selected one from the line of Judah (remember Jacob's prophecy in Gen. 49:9–12). His name was David, the son of Jesse.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

Instead of preaching or teaching about “being strong and courageous just like Joshua was,” focus on Joshua's faithful God. Joshua's name means “Yahweh saves!” It's only because of God's amazing grace and power that Israel enters the Promised Land (Joshua 1–5), takes the land (Joshua 6–12), divides the land (Joshua 13–21), and serves in the land (Joshua 22–24). All of these actions demonstrate God's faithfulness to his covenant promises. God is the Hero of this book, not Joshua.

THE KING RULES

So the Lord made a covenant with David, who desired to build God a house, a task that would ultimately belong to David's son Solomon. Amazingly, God promised to build David a house, a dynasty:

The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. (2 Sam. 7:11–13)

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God intended David's reign as king of Israel to display to the watching world God's wise and wonderful rule. The hope of a righteous reign of a forever King on a forever throne is connected to David and his family line. The sweet sound of these hope-filled divine promises given to David echoes throughout the rest of the Old Testament. God prospered David and the people of Israel abundantly (1 Chronicles 29). As the king goes, so goes the kingdom.

David's son Solomon became king of Israel after his father, and he built a magnificent house for the Lord, the temple in Jerusalem. Once again, God manifested his glorious presence among his people. This led Solomon to say: "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). The completed temple was glorious (Ps. 48:1-3, 9-11), and Solomon's fame and fortune was great (1 Kings 10). "King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind" (1 Kings 10:23-24).

God's promises to David, and even the promises made to Moses, appeared to be coming to pass. "Blessed be the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised. Not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke by Moses his servant" (1 Kings 8:56). And yet, catastrophe loomed just around the corner, because the wise king Solomon foolishly failed to heed God's warnings.

The Bible's Wisdom Literature (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ec-

clesiastes, Song of Solomon) represents the wisdom of David and Solomon, among others, at their highest watermark. Their books offer us a picture of what the wise life lived in the fear of the Lord looks like in this fallen, unpredictable, sometimes unjust, yet still ordered world. They look backward to creation and what God intended, as well as forward to Christ and what God promises.

Instead of governing and guiding God's people according to God's good Word, Solomon gathered to himself much gold (2 Chron. 9:13–21), mighty horses and chariots (2 Chron. 9:25–28), and multiple wives (1 Kings 11:3). This was a recipe for disaster, just as God had warned (Deut. 17:14–20). Worst of all, not only did Solomon fail to remove the high places where idols were being worshiped; the king himself in his old age did not wholly follow the Lord (1 Kings 11:5–10). The bright beginning of Solomon's reign as king was now headed toward disaster, for as the king goes, so goes the kingdom.

How would God respond? The Lord said to Solomon: "Since this has been your practice and you have not kept my covenant and my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you" (1 Kings 11:11–13). Solomon reigned as king over Israel for forty years. But after his death, the kingdom was torn in two, just as God had promised (1 Kings 12:16–20). Israel split into a northern kingdom (Israel) and southern kingdom (Judah). Every future king in Israel and Judah (except for Hezekiah and Josiah) failed to destroy the idolatrous high places. The kings sinned and the people sinned. They "feared other gods and

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walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had practiced” (2 Kings 17:7–8). As the king goes, so goes the kingdom.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

Don't focus a sermon or lesson simply on David's courage or "how to face the giants in your life." Instead, treat the choosing of David, a man after God's heart, to reign as king over God's people as a way God was restoring his rule on the earth (1 Sam. 16:1–13). God promised David that a forever King from his family would reign on a forever throne (2 Samuel 7). Make this connection to Jesus explicit to your people. Help them see that this future son of David would also be his Lord (Psalm 110; Isa. 9:6–7; Ezek. 34:22–23; Matt. 22:45).

King David is even described in the New Testament as a prophet. What did David prophesy about? Jesus, of course: "Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ" (Acts 2:29–31; see Psalm 16).

THE KING CASTS OUT

As with Adam, the treacherous rebellion of God's people led to exile in the east when Israel and Judah were cast out of God's good land (Gen. 3:24; 2 Kings 17:18, 23). The northern kingdom was exiled to Assyria in 722 BC, and the southern kingdom was exiled to Babylon in 586 BC. Just like in Eden,

God had warned his people of the consequences of such rebellion. In his mercy and patience, he raised up prophet after prophet to herald a message of repentance to his wayward people (1 Kings 14:15). Elijah and Elisha and many other prophets confronted and challenged God's unfaithful people. But the people were stubborn and refused to heed God's repeated warnings:

The LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets."

But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false. (2 Kings 17:13–15)

Instead of worshiping the true God, they worshiped what was false, and so they became false. Instead of bowing down to God alone, they made idols for themselves, and they even sacrificed their own sons and daughters to their false gods (2 Kings 17:17). Therefore, God the King cast out his people just as he had warned (Lev. 26:33; Deut. 28:63–67).

The impact of the judgment of exile was enormous: no king, no land, no temple—only tears.

By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.

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On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How shall we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land? (Ps. 137:1–4)

The exile of God's people to Assyria and Babylon demonstrated once again the holiness of God and the deadly consequences of rebelling against him.

The hopes and dreams of God's ancient people prospering under his royal rule seemed to be extinguished.

We have transgressed and rebelled,
and you have not forgiven.

You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us,
killing without pity;
you have wrapped yourself with a cloud
so that no prayer can pass through.
You have made us scum and garbage
among the peoples.

All our enemies
open their mouths against us;
panic and pitfall have come upon us,
devastation and destruction. (Lam. 3:42–47)

The King had cast them out. But his mercies are new every morning because his faithfulness is great (Lam. 3:23).

Preaching and Teaching Tip

The great acts of salvation and judgment in Scripture are often pictures of God's greater acts of salvation and judgment to come. From Adam and Eve's exile out of Eden, to the judgment of the flood in Noah's day, we see clearly that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Don't miss this weighty reality when preaching or teaching from the Old Testament prophetic books on God's judgment in the form of exile.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation to Babylon are described by the prophets like the horror of dwelling in total darkness (Lam. 3:1–2), which anticipates the horrors of being cast out into the eternal darkness of hell, the place of ultimate outer darkness, the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

Also, make sure you highlight the exile status of God's people. Ever since Adam and Eve were exiled from Paradise, God's people have always been "sojourners" (1 Pet. 2:11), "strangers and exiles" (Heb. 11:13), because "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come" (Heb. 13:14).

THE KING PROMISES

And yet, even amid the horrors of exile, God's servants, the prophets, maintained and kindled fresh hope in the hearts of God's people. The stinging reality of the exile was mingled with the promise of awesome return from exile:

Therefore I will hurl you out of this land into a land that neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.

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Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, "As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt," but "As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them." For I will bring them back to their own land that I gave to their fathers. (Jer. 16:13–15)

The prophets repeatedly reminded Israel of God's promises to their forebears, Abraham and David. They pointed forward to a new work that the Lord would do in the last days. These promises from the past and hopes of the last days offered the prospect of a glorious future. The prophets looked by faith to a future work of God (Hab. 1:5; 3:2), and this hope produced joy in the Lord.

Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation. (Hab. 3:17–18)

This prophetic hope looked beyond the ravages of the exile and centered on the arrival of a future King like David (Ezek. 34:23). God himself promised to come and shepherd his people, and he promised that David would be their shepherd. God also promised to do something astonishing: establish a new covenant. He said to Jeremiah, one of his prophets:

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:33–34)

Elsewhere, the Lord says that this new covenant will involve a regathering of his people through a kind of new exodus (Ezek. 36:26–28; cf. Deut. 30:3–4) and a pouring out of his Spirit in a fresh way, such that all the people of God will be given new hearts to trust and obey their King (Joel 2:28–29). The prophets even hold out the hope that the King of all creation will bring about a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth in which all the nations shall worship before the Lord (Isa. 65:17; 66:22–23).

Meanwhile, all these magnificent hopes were mingled with the arrival of a mysterious figure, the servant of the Lord. He would be from David's family tree and anointed by God's Spirit (Isa. 11:1–3). This servant would be from Israel and would bring God's people back to the Lord (Isa. 49:5).

But the work of this servant would create a people from all the world. The Lord said of this servant:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.
(Isa. 49:6; cf. Acts 13:47)

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The King's plan to bless the world and fulfill the promise given to Abraham was connected to this future Davidic figure. The prophets looked forward to his coming and longed for the arrival of his forever kingdom (Isa. 9:6–7). When this king would finally come, he would bring salvation to his people.

All the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God. (Isa. 52:10)

But how would this exalted One, this mysterious future King from David's line, rescue his people from their sins? Amazingly, the prophets say the king would be crushed and killed—not for his own transgressions, but for those of his people. Hear these words from Isaiah:

He was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. (Isa. 53:5)

It is no surprise that, centuries later, the apostle Peter would write about the prophets as those through whom the Spirit of Christ was indicating “the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories” (1 Pet. 1:10–12). These glorious promises, written down by the prophets, fueled great expectation.

And yet, the hope seemed to fizzle when the people of Israel finally returned from their exile (see Ezra and Nehemiah). For hundreds of years, in fact, these precious prophetic hopes seemed to slumber, waiting for the day when all the King's promises would finally come to pass.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

When preaching or teaching from the Old Testament prophets, make sure you faithfully proclaim the message of the Holy Spirit–inspired book rather than centering on the prophet himself.* The book of Isaiah isn't mainly about the prophet Isaiah. The book of Daniel isn't mainly about Daniel. The book of Jeremiah isn't mainly about the prophet Jeremiah. So as you work through the prophetic books, ask, What is the message of this *book* as a whole? Once you grasp the point of the book, you can then begin to look for connections across the canon to Christ (Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:25, 27, 44).

The Old Testament prophetic books aren't in the Bible for us to focus our attention on the moral lessons that can be drawn from various individuals' lives. Instead of staring at *them*, help your people to stare at what the prophets themselves were staring at, namely, God's great salvation through the coming Messiah!

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Pet. 1:9–12)

* See John Sailhamer, "Preaching from the Prophets," in *Preaching the Old Testament*, ed. Scott M. Gibson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 115–36.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE'S BIG STORY?

Part 2

THE KING ARRIVES

And finally, the long-awaited King arrived.

The King of kings himself came to rescue a people for his praise and redeem rebels who were lost. After years of darkness, the Light of the world, the true Light, finally came into the world (John 1:9). After a long season of silence, the eternal Word, who was with God and who was God, became flesh and dwelt among us to make God the Father known (John 1:14, 18). Just as God had promised, this King was indeed the son of David and of Abraham (Matt. 1:1). Yet, at the same time, this King would also be God in the flesh, God with us, just as the prophets foretold:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

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“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel”

(which means, God with us). (Matt. 1:22–23)

The infinite Son of God became an infant. The eternal Son of God became a man. And this man, this King, would be called Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). In Jesus, the eternal Word made flesh, the Lord himself came to be present with his people and to accomplish the mission his Father had given him. Jesus is God’s beloved Son, the one in whom the Father is well pleased (Luke 3:22). Unlike Adam and Israel, Jesus always lives to please and honor his Father. So after passing through the waters of baptism, endowed by God’s Spirit, the Son of God was led into the wilderness to battle Satan, the Archenemy of God and his people (Luke 4:1–2).

The Devil, the ancient Serpent, sought to stop Jesus at the outset of his ministry. But where Adam and Abraham and Moses and David and Solomon and Israel failed, Jesus succeeded by trusting in God’s good Word. Jesus demonstrated to all that he is God’s true and faithful Son (Luke 4:1–13). After his victory in the wilderness, Jesus began to proclaim the gospel of God, announcing, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). He gathers his followers and teaches them about his kingdom (Matthew 13). God’s rule and reign are displayed powerfully throughout Jesus’s earthly ministry.

As the prophet who was like Moses, Jesus performed all kinds of signs and wonders in the midst of Israel, showing to

all the mighty power of God (Deut. 18:15; 34:10–12). Jesus healed the sick, fed thousands with bread from heaven, and even raised the dead. And yet, Jesus wasn't the kind of king the world expected. The kingdom Jesus announced wasn't one that would be established by earthly means. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting" (John 18:36).

Preaching and Teaching Tip

The Gospels are all about Jesus. And yet it's easy to lose sight of him and focus our sermons or lessons on something that's not really of primary importance. For example, if you were teaching through the Gospel according to Matthew and you arrive in 8:23–9:8, how would you handle this passage? There are three descriptions of Jesus performing a variety of miracles, and there are many possible "rabbit trails" because the three events recorded in this section of Scripture are so breathtakingly amazing: the calming of a storm (8:23–27), the healing of a demon-possessed man (8:28–34), and the healing and forgiving of a crippled sinner (9:1–8). What's the point? Jesus is the one who has authority! He has authority over creation, over demons, and over sin and sickness. Make sure when preaching or teaching from the Gospels, that you are making much more of Jesus than of anything else.

What's more, Jesus wasn't even the kind of king his own people expected. "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (John 1:10–11). Even Jesus's disciples were confused at first about the nature of his mission and what

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he aimed to accomplish. Jesus repeatedly made known to his followers that instead of being embraced and celebrated, he would be rejected. Instead of being honored and adored, Jesus would first be betrayed and even put to death as a criminal on a Roman cross.

This long-awaited King was to be crucified.

THE KING SUFFERS AND SAVES

The way forward for King Jesus led directly to the cross. Just as the Lord had promised through his prophets, the servant of the Lord would save by suffering in the place of rebels. And just as the Lord had promised back in Genesis 3:15, the seed of Eve would one day crush the head of the Serpent, but his heel would be bruised. On the cross, Jesus bore the awful curse of sin and was sacrificed as a substitute for sinners. On the cross, he cried out with a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). On the cross, Jesus shed his blood as a sacrifice for sinners and established the promised new covenant (Luke 22:20). On the cross, the blood of the King “is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28).

Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). And

though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6–8)

Jesus became the substitute perfection and substitute punishment that his people desperately needed.

Everything that the sacrificial system pointed forward to was fulfilled in “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). As Paul writes to the church at Corinth, “All the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Cor. 1:20). The Gospel writers demonstrate that Jesus is the true spotless Passover Lamb, slain to cover the sins of his people and to rescue them from judgment by enacting a new and better exodus (Luke 9:31; John 19:36).

Nothing can stand in the way of Jesus redeeming his people. Not even death. His love proved to be stronger than death and deeper than hell.

After three days, Jesus rose again from the dead. The first visitors to his now-empty tomb were met by angels who delivered this astounding news: “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead” (Matt. 28:5–7).

By rising again from the dead, King Jesus began the work of new creation, a work first promised in the Old Testament. Through the resurrection of Christ, this end-time reality has invaded the present age. Even the curse of sin and the power of death could not keep the King of kings in the grave. Jesus rose again, demonstrating that he was precisely who he said he was throughout his earthly ministry.

Now, two thousand years later, the Lord Jesus summons all rebels to turn from their sins and trust in him. The response Jesus demands of the whole world is to believe in him or be

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condemned (John 3:16–18). The risen King promises to save all those, whether Jew or Gentile, who believe in him.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

Around one-third of the Gospels focuses on the final week of Jesus's life, the week leading up to his crucifixion and resurrection. The other two-thirds of the Gospels prepare us to understand the One who goes to Jerusalem, is delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, is condemned to death, and is handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked, spat upon, flogged, and crucified (Mark 10:33–34).

And this Jesus, the one who has authority, humbly goes to the cross and dies to redeem a rebellious people who have spurned his authority (Matt. 20:25–28). And this same Jesus, who rose again on the third day and who has “all authority in heaven and on earth,” is worthy of all of our worship (Matt. 28:17–18). In fact, he demands and he deserves the worship of the whole world (Matt. 28:18–20). Surely all of our sermons from the Gospels ought to focus on him!

When we proclaim Christ from the Gospels, we ought to follow Sinclair Ferguson's sage advice and “expend our energies admiring, exploring, expositing, and extolling Jesus Christ.”*

*“An Interview with Sinclair Ferguson,” by C. J. Mahaney, quoted in Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002), 51.

THE KING SENDS

By rising from the dead, Jesus demonstrated to heaven and earth that he is the almighty King. Not even death could stop him. The risen Christ said to his disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20)

Jesus calls his disciples to go and make more disciples. Following the King means helping others to follow the King. So Jesus commissions his followers to go into all the world to make disciples of all the nations. This son of David intends to exercise his rule over all the nations, and the son of Abraham intends to bless all the nations through his gospel.

Christ's weighty commission would be utterly impossible to accomplish alone. So King Jesus reminded his followers of his awesome authority and the comforting promise of his presence until the end of the age. In order to be with his disciples forever, Jesus left them behind. He led his disciples "out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven" (Luke 24:50–51).

Jesus had already made it clear that he would need to go away and return to heaven in order to send the One who would help empower them to both follow him and bear witness about him to all the world. And Jesus had already made it clear that he would leave behind churches that had the authority to bind and loose on earth what is bound and loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). Jesus planned to leave behind embassies or outposts of his sovereign rule.

Just before he ascended into heaven, he told his disciples,

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“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). According to Jesus, the coming of the Holy Spirit would accompany conviction upon the world (John 16:7–11).

So Jesus ascended into heaven, and he and God the Father poured out the promised Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–41). And just like he promised, we find the Spirit of God creating boldness in believers to proclaim the gospel, and the Spirit of God convicting sinners of their desperate need to repent and believe.

Case in point: the once-timid Peter, who cowardly denied the Lord Jesus three times on the night he was betrayed, was filled with the Spirit and declared that Jesus died according to God’s plan, that he was raised in power, and that he was now exalted in heaven. Peter went on to preach, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:22–24, 33–36).

Peter’s message at Pentecost was clear: Jesus died and rose again, and he alone is the risen and reigning King. Jesus alone has been exalted to the Father’s right hand of majesty. And so three thousand rebels repented of their sins and trusted in King Jesus (Acts 2:41). They received the word of truth and were baptized, just as Jesus had commanded.

What began that day in Jerusalem eventually spread not only among the Jews but among the Gentiles as well. God’s plan to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham was being fulfilled. Local churches formed, and these churches

planted more churches. To be sure, these churches faced many obstacles—and yet, even in the face of persecution, even when confronted with problems from within and without, nothing could stop the forward progress of the gospel.

In a mighty display of power and grace, the risen Jesus called Saul, a man “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” to be his chosen instrument to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel (Acts 9:1, 15). The Lord chose a persecutor of his church and transformed him by grace into an apostle who would bear witness to King Jesus throughout much of the Roman world.

So, through the witness and work of the apostles, led by Peter and Paul (previously called Saul), along with thousands of unnamed Christians, the gospel went forth in power, and the church spread. “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied” (Acts 9:31). Luke records this unhindered march by providing summary statements throughout the book of Acts. Each of these statements shows that Jesus is King, and his kingdom will fully and finally be established (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20).

Before his ascension, Jesus had spoken to his disciples about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). At the conclusion of the book of Acts, we find Paul doing the same thing in Rome: “From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (Acts 28:23; see also 28:31). The glorious good news of what King

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Jesus has done and is doing has spread—from Jerusalem, into Judea and Samaria, and finally into the ends of the earth. Just like he promised (Acts 1:8).

Preaching and Teaching Tip

When preaching or teaching from the book of Acts, be sure to highlight Luke's emphasis on the fulfillment of the saving promises of God through his unfolding plan in Christ. There are several biblical-theological themes that Luke draws upon: the arrival of the "last days"; the hope of the resurrection of the dead; the restoration of the kingdom; the inclusion of the Gentiles; the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit; the preaching of the gospel, beginning in Jerusalem and progressing from there to all nations. The book of Acts isn't merely the "acts of the apostles"; it's the acts of the risen Lord Jesus.*

* See Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke's Account of God's Unfolding Plan* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

THE KING REIGNS

In the Old Testament, we find the prophets summoning God's people to trust the Lord and to live faithful lives of love and obedience under his rule and reign. In the same way, the letters of the New Testament explain and apply what it looks like to live as his people under the reign of the risen and exalted King Jesus.

In this way, all the Scriptures are able to make believers wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Paul writes, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Throughout the New Testament’s letters, the biblical writers follow a consistent pattern. They highlight and unpack who King Jesus is and what he’s graciously done for undeserving sinners. Finally, they summon their readers to follow him in trust and obedience, all for his glory.

When writing to the church in Colossae, Paul begins by describing the magnificence of the Lord Jesus, the one who is sovereign over all creation and over the new creation:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:15–17)

As the Lord of all creation, he is preeminent. And amazingly, this Lord is the one who made peace “by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20).

This is who the Lord Jesus is. This is the One in whom believers have placed their eternal hope and trust. This is the One who died and rose again, bringing about the promise of the new covenant and a glimpse of the new creation.

And this is what the church is: a people purchased by the blood of Christ, filled with and gathered by his Spirit, united by faith in the gospel, governed by his Word, displaying the manifold wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10). The church is a chosen race, a

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royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people for God's own possession (1 Pet. 2:9).

So, what is the fitting response of God's people, the church, to this glorious King? "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Col. 2:6–7). Paul spends the rest of Colossians wisely unpacking what it means for all those who follow Jesus to live for the glory of Christ in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in a world at enmity with God.

Even though Jesus is risen and reigning, his followers live in the tension of the *now* and the *not yet*. King Jesus is building his church *now*, but his kingdom has *not yet* been finally established in glory. Jesus suffered and then entered into glory; those who follow him must do the same.

Peter writes to a group of believers scattered throughout the Roman empire, and he highlights both the present blessings and the future inheritance secured by God's mercy in Christ: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3–9).

Followers of King Jesus have a living hope. Believers experience this hope *already*—and yet, there's still more to come. Believers suffer now, but they will be glorified in Christ when he returns. This glorious hope, even amid difficult trials and persecutions, inspires lives of trust and obedience to our Lord and King.

Notice how Peter talks about the Christian life:

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Pet. 1:13–16)

Once again, the truth of who King Jesus is and what he has done informs and inspires obedience to him, all for his glory.

The mission Jesus gave to his churches is a difficult and costly one. Following him in faith and obedience will certainly require enduring persecution and suffering for the sake of the gospel. But as believers look forward in the hope of his return, believers also look back and remember that the One who is now risen and exalted on high was also the servant who suffered and died.

He told his followers, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:10–12). Paul would later write, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Believers suffer in a fallen world—just like everyone else. But unlike those who are still in their sins, followers of King Jesus are promised the additional suffering of facing the enmity of a world that hates the Lord and opposes his people.

So what are followers of the King to do? Once again, the church looks to her Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

Make sure, when you preach or teach from the New Testament letters, that you connect the apostolic commands to apostolic gospel truths. About one-third of the entire New Testament is made up of epistles or letters. When explaining them, emphasize how the things *we must do* are rooted in or grounded upon the things that *are true*. The commands and exhortations of the gospel (imperatives: “You must do this!”) should arise from the exposition of God’s grace in the gospel (indicatives: “God has already done this”).

For example, Peter commands his readers, “Be holy in all your conduct” (1 Pet. 1:15b). That’s the imperative. But notice how Peter grounds this imperative to holiness in the glorious indicatives of God’s saving call and his holiness. “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet. 1:14–16). We are to be holy precisely because the One who called us savingly to himself is holy. God himself is holy. Our pursuit of holiness rests on the sure foundation of the holiness of God. If we are his children, we should strive to be like him in all our conduct.

This indicative-imperative pattern is also a common structure of entire New Testament epistles. Both Romans and Ephesians generally follow this pattern. In Ephesians 1–3, Paul expounds the riches of God’s grace toward us in Jesus. That’s the indicative—what is the case. Then in Ephesians 4–6, the apostle draws out implications and applies and exhorts his readers to holiness. That’s the imperative—what *ought* to follow. Likewise, Paul’s letter to the Romans is generally understood as indicative (chaps. 1–11) followed by imperative (chaps. 12–16).

This indicative and imperative structure isn’t new. It’s a biblical-theological pattern found throughout the Old Testament. For example, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:2–3).

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet. 2:21–25; see Isa. 52:12–53:12)

Followers of this King look to him by faith until he returns and they at last see him face-to-face.

THE KING RETURNS

The story of Scripture begins with God ruling and reigning as King over everything and with a holy people who were to live for his praise. So it is fitting that the Bible ends with the promise of the risen and reigning Jesus returning, rescuing, judging, and making all things new, including a new people with whom God will once again be pleased to dwell.

The end of the Bible's story, recorded by John in the book of Revelation, provides a glimpse of how the story will end. And knowing the end of the story shapes what it means to follow Jesus here and now, from today until the final day. The return of the King is the blessed hope of all those who have trusted in Jesus. While waiting for his triumphant return, his followers seek to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives empowered by God's grace as people "who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:11–14).

But those who refuse to obey Christ's worldwide sum-

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mons to repent face an awful judgment “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7–8). When the King returns, the worldwide rebellion against his good and right and holy reign will be crushed. Jesus declares that for “the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:6–8). The Devil, the ancient Enemy of God, will be thrown into the lake of fire to be “tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10).

Even in judgment, the King will be glorified. But the end of the story also includes gracious salvation because the future kingdom of God will include believers in Jesus from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Redeemed sinners from all nations will give all praise and blessing and honor to the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the seed of Abraham, the son of David, Christ Jesus the Lord.

But why? Why is Jesus worthy of such adoration? John tells us:

And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed
people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,

and you have made them a kingdom and priests to
our God,
and they shall reign on the earth." (Rev. 5:9–10)

Jesus is worthy because Jesus was slain. Knowing that he has purchased a people from all nations for the sake of his name beckons believers to faithful obedience in heralding this good news to all nations. Not only does the end of the story preview a redeemed people from all nations, but we also see the arrival of an utterly renewed world. The King promises to make all things new, including new heavens and a new earth: "According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13).

In this world believers walk by faith, looking with expectation and hope to the city that is to come, whose designer and builder is God. John describes this glorious future in the book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (21:1). In this New Jerusalem, this holy city, God the King will once again dwell with his people. The presence of sin, death, tears, and pain will be replaced with the presence of God. John tells us, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (21:4).

God's good world, now stained by sin and death, will be made new. The former things will have passed away. No more death or pain or tears. No more sin or corruption or shame. And best of all, all of God's people will finally be together in God's glorious presence, in the presence of their King, forever.

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He will tenderly wipe away every tear. And the Creator will once again dwell with his creatures. The curse will be replaced with God's permanent blessing, enjoyed fully and freely forever. Christ the King will be adored and honored by all whom he has graciously sought and saved.

The very heart of the Bible's message is the good and right reign of God over all his people and over all his creation.¹ The story of Scripture, then, is the story of God the King, and his loving and gracious purposes of saving a people for himself to delight in his glorious presence forever. Understanding this story brings us to the center of all reality. Come soon, King Jesus.

Preaching and Teaching Tip

When you teach and preach about heaven, make sure you dispel the notion that the afterlife for the Christian will be some type of eternal disembodied spiritual existence "in the clouds." This kind of emphasis misses the hope of the resurrection of the body and the renewal of all things.

The Old Testament and the New Testament see the permanent home for God's people in a new heaven and new earth: "According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13; see also Isa. 65:17; 66:22).

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY SHAPES A CHURCH'S TEACHING

If the story of Scripture is all about Christ the King, this reality ought to impact the preaching and teaching ministry of the local church directly. In this chapter, we want to briefly highlight a few important ways biblical theology can help those who handle God's Word on behalf of God's people. And then we will provide some practical tools and next steps to help put biblical theology to work in our teaching ministries.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AS GUARD AND GUIDE

Biblical theology is a helpful guard and guide for teachers and preachers of God's Word. It helps guard against two perennial enemies for those who regularly teach the Bible: proof-texting and moralism. Similarly, biblical theology helps guide preachers and teachers toward evangelistic, Christ-centered exposition that emphasizes the glorious Hero of the whole story, Jesus Christ.

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Preaching Christ instead of Proof-Texting

First, biblical theology guards the preacher from proof-texting and guides the preacher toward proclaiming Christ from all of Scripture.

When we use the Bible to prove our point without regard for the context of the passage, we are proof-texting. Proof-texting reads meaning into a passage instead of reading meaning out of the passage. Proof-texting is easy because you don't have to do the serious and careful and prayerful work of understanding the author's intended meaning. This is a serious problem because those who teach God's Word to God's people should proclaim it "as one who speaks oracles of God" in order that God would receive glory through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 4:11).

Instead of laboring to study the text and humbly giving heed to the divinely inspired context, proof-texting comes to the text with a preconceived meaning. Preachers should strive, by God's grace, to rightly handle the Word of God. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Proof-texting tampers with God's Word. It distorts and deceives. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). Instead of unfolding what a passage says in context by the "open statement of

the truth,” proof-texting says whatever the pastor or teacher wants the passage to say.

Paul exhorted Timothy to “preach the word” (2 Tim. 4:2). This “word” is defined for us in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” All Scripture is profitable or useful. It’s useful “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training.” The task commanded by Paul is to “preach” or “proclaim” or “herald” this useful Word.

Instead of preaching God’s inspired and useful Word, proof-texting uses God’s Word to support the preacher’s own desires. Proof-texting twists the meaning of a biblical passage and makes it “say” something it wasn’t intended to say. Instead of using the Bible this way, teachers and preachers are supposed to expose God’s people to the Bible by faithfully unpacking the meaning of a given text.

Our congregations and all those who sit under our teaching will in large measure learn how to study the Bible by observing how we teach the Bible. A teaching ministry that is propped up by the practice of plucking random verses out of context to serve the whims and desires of the preacher is not a firm foundation for church health.

But how can biblical theology ward us away from proof-texting? Biblical theology guides the preacher toward proclaiming Christ from all of Scripture. Knowing the big story of Scripture helps Bible teachers to proclaim Christ from every part of the Bible.

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Proof-texting is often the result of failing to see how the whole Bible, especially the Old Testament, is connected to Jesus. Teaching from the Old Testament can sometimes feel a bit like being watched while you carve a chicken. It's fairly easy to start well, but you soon have to make some tricky decisions (about which everyone has an opinion), and it's very easy to end up in a sticky mess with lots of bits left over that no one knows what to do with.¹ Unfortunately, too many preachers and teachers resort to proof-texting the Old Testament instead of preaching Christ from the Old Testament.

If you don't know the whole story of Scripture, you will tend to avoid parts of the Bible that are less familiar. But having a good grasp of Scripture's storyline that culminates in Jesus Christ will liberate you to teach and preach from even the passages that seem off the beaten path.

For example, how would biblical theology help guide the preacher who is teaching through the book of Leviticus? Let's say you have arrived at chapters 13–15, dealing with laws for cleansing lepers and laws concerning bodily discharges. When we zoom in to Leviticus 13–15, we discover that it's part of a larger section of the book often known as the cleanliness code (Leviticus 11–15). Its laws deal with distinguishing what is clean or unclean.

In broad strokes, the book of Leviticus intends to answer the question of how an unholy people might dwell in the presence of a holy God. The emphasis on lepers and bodily discharges in these chapters highlights how uncleanness leads to defilement.

For example, a diseased person was required to cry out,

“Unclean! Unclean!” (Lev. 13:45) The leprous person’s uncleanness led to defilement, and this required isolation and banishment. “He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Lev. 13:46). Israelites who were ritually defiled had to leave the presence of God and go outside the camp. To be sent outside the camp of Israel was to be temporarily cut off from God, whose glorious presence dwelt in the tabernacle.

Those who came into physical contact with a leper or someone with a bodily discharge also became defiled and required cleansing. The Lord told Moses that these cleanliness laws must be preserved in order to keep the camp holy. “Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst” (Lev. 15:31).

So how does biblical theology help us understand and faithfully proclaim these three chapters in Leviticus?

As we’ll see later on, the foundation of biblical theology is careful and prayerful study of the biblical text, letting Scripture interpret Scripture. It requires preachers to zoom in and study the passage in its original context and then zoom out to see how it fits within the big story of Scripture, which culminates in Jesus. After faithfully expounding the meaning of these chapters in their historical context, we should ask what the storyline of Scripture tells us about Leviticus 13–15. There are several striking connections between these cleanliness laws and the ministry of Jesus recorded for us in the Gospels.

For example, it’s remarkable that when Jesus came into

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physical contact with a leper and a woman suffering from a discharge, Jesus didn't become defiled. Instead, he sanctified. Luke records both encounters:

While he was in one of the cities, there came a man full of leprosy. And when he saw Jesus, he fell on his face and begged him, "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." And Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will; be clean." And immediately the leprosy left him. (Luke 5:12-13)

And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and though she had spent all her living on physicians, she could not be healed by anyone. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, and immediately her discharge of blood ceased. (Luke 8:43-44)

Both passages emphasize that Jesus touched or was touched by those suffering from physical ailments that left them languishing as outcasts because of their ritual defilement. And yet, touching a leper didn't defile Jesus. Touching a woman with a discharge didn't defile Jesus. As the Holy One of Israel, Jesus can make even the unclean clean. But the Gospel writers don't stop there.

Each one of the Gospels ends with the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus would eventually go to the cross, where he would take upon himself the curse of sin. On the cross, Jesus himself suffered outside the camp, bearing the reproach of his people as he was cut off from his Father's presence, enduring the curse of God Almighty on the cross. Jesus secured the ultimate cleansing of his people on the cross. As the author of Hebrews tells us, "Jesus also suffered

outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood” (Heb. 13:12).

So, biblical theology helps the preacher because it guides him toward this kind of evangelistic, Christ-centered exposition of passages like Leviticus 13–15. Instead of proof-texting, we ought to strive toward faithfully proclaiming Christ from all of Scripture.

Preaching Jesus instead of Moralism

Second, biblical theology both guards the preacher from moralism and guides the preacher in showing how Jesus is the Hero of the whole story.

Preaching steeped in moralism merely highlights the positive or negative character qualities in a biblical figure for the purpose of behavior modification. Moralism motivates listeners to improve behavior but does so by undercutting the gospel. This is a problem because, as we’ve seen, Scripture is not primarily a behavior modification program. The good news of the gospel isn’t moral self-improvement. The call for pastors and teachers is to proclaim Christ (Col. 1:28). All Scripture is able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). So, no matter what passage you are teaching, you aren’t finished until you make clear how the passage points to and exalts Jesus.

Biblical theology also helps us faithfully teach a passage like 1 Samuel 17, the story of David and Goliath. This passage isn’t merely intended as a lesson on how to face the “giants” in our lives. The point of the passage isn’t simply to highlight David’s courage. To be sure, David certainly displayed great

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courage in running out to face the mighty Goliath. But if we teach our congregations from this passage that “David was really brave; so therefore we need to work hard at being brave like David,” then we’ve utterly failed and dishonored Christ, who deserves all glory and praise.

Biblical theology guards against moralism by warding us away from this kind of preaching. David may be *a* hero of this story, but Jesus is *the* Hero of the biblical story.

Scripture often holds out individuals as examples. Hebrews 11 highlights heroes of the faith, including David (Heb. 11:32–34). So it is true that David provides a positive example for believers. But when we study 1 Samuel 17 carefully and prayerfully, we begin to realize that someone greater than David is here! When we zoom out and set this passage in the biblical storyline of Scripture, we begin to see many wonderful connections to an even greater King.

Consider that David was a Spirit-anointed King (1 Sam. 16:13) from the tribe of Judah (1 Sam. 16:1; cf. Gen. 49:10) and the city of Bethlehem (1 Sam. 16:4), who through his fervent faith and relationship with God (17:26, 36, 45–46) acted valiantly (17:48–51) as the representative champion of his people in order to vanquish a mighty enemy (17:4–7) and to impute the glorious benefits of his victory (17:8–9, 52–54) to a cowering, faithless, and undeserving people (17:24). By teaching this passage through the lens of biblical theology, we are able to see how its canonical contours point to an even greater David, the One who is David’s son and David’s Lord (Luke 20:41–44), the One who is the ultimate champion of God’s people. This kind of preaching pays attention to the pas-

sage itself but also gives heed to the canonical context that leads us to Christ.

Consider, as well, how biblical theology guards against moralism in the story of Samson, found in Judges 13–16. The life of Samson isn't mainly about avoiding dating relationships with unbelievers. Samson foolishly pursued sinful relationships with women (14:3; 16:4–5), including a prostitute (16:1). And in so doing, he mimicked the spiritual whoredom of Israel, which pursued foreign wives and gods (Ex. 34:15–16; Deut. 7:3–4; Judg. 3:6; Jer. 3:1–2). But if we reduce this text to meaning that “Samson got involved with the wrong women; so therefore don't be like Samson,” then we have slipped into moralism.

The life and death of Samson form a kind of microcosm of the depths of Israel's sin as a nation. The depraved leaders of the nation depict the depravity of the nation. The book of Judges, and particularly the ministry of Samson, highlights Israel's desperate need for a good and righteous and holy King (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

Once we notice this context in the book of Judges, we may zoom out and connect the Samson narrative with the larger story of Scripture. What we discover is that many textual allusions provide gospel comparisons and contrasts between Samson and Jesus. Just consider that in Samson's story an angel announced to a barren woman in Israel that she would conceive and give birth to one who would be savior of his people (2:16, 18; 13:1–5).

This savior grew in strength, and the Lord blessed him (Judg. 13:24). The Spirit of the Lord was upon him and

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empowered his mighty ministry (13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14). And yet, this God-appointed deliverer was ultimately betrayed for silver by someone close enough to kiss him (16:5). He was bound and led away to death (16:21), surrounded by his taunting enemies (16:23–25). With his arms outstretched (16:29), Samson prayed to the Lord for the strength to avenge his enemies (16:28) through his own death (16:30).

But his final prayer was for vengeance, not for mercy (cf. Luke 23:34). Biblical theology helps us see how Jesus, and not Samson, is to be proclaimed as the ultimate Savior and Judge and Hero of Scripture.

Moralism can also be a problem even when we teach and preach from the New Testament. Biblical theology guards against moralism and guides us toward keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, even when teaching from the Gospels.

The New Testament begins with four Gospels, historical narratives of a particular kind. They are not exactly biographies of Jesus. They are intentionally shaped to highlight the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Sinclair Ferguson reminds us of a basic but often neglected principle to keep fixed in our minds when we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John: “When you read the Gospels, don’t lose sight of Jesus; keep your eyes fixed on him.”²

This principle guards us against reading a passage and asking first, What does this passage tell me about me? Or we might be tempted to ask immediately, Who am I like in this story? Instead, we should ask first and foremost, What does this passage tell me about the Lord Jesus?

Take, for example, the account in the Gospel of Luke about

Jesus being tempted by the Devil in the wilderness at the outset of his earthly ministry (Luke 4:1–13):

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." And Jesus answered him, "It is written,

"You shall worship the Lord your God,
and him only shall you serve."

And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you,
to guard you,'

and

"On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone."

And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

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The primary truth taught in this passage is *not* “How to Fight Temptation Like Jesus.” Knowing Scripture so that you can fight temptation is certainly a secondary implication of the text. We should hide God’s Word in our hearts, lest we sin against God when we are tempted.

But if we reduce this passage to mean, “Jesus was tempted. This is how he fought against temptation. So let’s just be like Jesus,” then we’ve missed out. There is more going on in this passage, and biblical theology gives us the lens to see it.

In the context, Luke has already highlighted that Jesus is God’s beloved Son. At his baptism, “a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:22). Luke then records Jesus’s genealogy that culminates with “Adam, the son of God” (Luke 3:38). And when we read the temptation account, we notice that the Scriptures Jesus quoted in his battle against the Devil are all connected to Israel’s wilderness testing (Deut. 8:3; 6:13, 16). Israel was called God’s “firstborn son” in Exodus 4:22; they were tested in the wilderness and failed miserably.

By zooming out, we begin to see several connections between the testing of Jesus and the testing of Israel in the wilderness, recorded in Deuteronomy 8:2–3:

You shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

How does biblical theology guard us against moralism and help us highlight Jesus as the Hero of Scripture from this passage? When we keep our eyes on Jesus, we don't read ourselves into the passage. Luke is highlighting for us how different Jesus is from Adam and from Israel. Adam, God's unfaithful son, was tempted by the Serpent to mistrust God and satisfy his own desires (Gen. 3:6) in Paradise, in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1). Adam was unfaithful and failed. But Jesus was faithful and did not give in to the Devil (Luke 4:3-4).

Israel, God's unfaithful son (Ex. 4:22), passed through the waters (Ex. 14:21-31) and was immediately led by the Lord into the desert, where they were tested for forty years (Deut. 8:2). Israel was unfaithful and failed. But Jesus, God's faithful Son, passed through the waters (Luke 3:21) and was immediately led by the Holy Spirit into the desert, where he was tested for forty days (Luke 4:1-2). And yet, where Adam and Israel both failed, Jesus remained faithful.

So is Luke 4:1-13 *mainly* about how we should fight against temptation? Or is it *mainly* about Jesus, the one who is the faithful and obedient Son of God (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 4:14; 1 Pet. 2:22-23)?

Biblical theology helps us to see that we all have been unfaithful and disobedient, just like Adam and Israel. We all have given in to temptation and sinned against God. But Jesus is the perfectly faithful and obedient Son of God, who is worthy of all adoration and praise.

So in this text, biblical theology helps us to keep our eyes on Jesus, the Hero of the story. Instead of only drawing

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applications of how we can fight temptation, we discover even more reasons to glorify him as the faithful and obedient Son, who from the outset of his ministry endured temptation and yet did not sin. We, like Adam and Israel, have disobeyed and failed. But where we have been tempted and given in to sin, Jesus, the faithful and beloved Son of God, has not.

Clearly, biblical theology shapes the teaching ministry of the local church. But we still must answer the question: How do you do it? How does one go about putting biblical theology to work?

Let's spend the rest of this chapter overviewing the various tools Bible teachers can use to faithfully connect any passage to the main storyline of Scripture. (To see how biblical theology applies to six sample texts, see the appendix, "Additional Biblical-Theological Examples.")

TOOLS AND STEPS FOR PREACHING CHRIST

The tools described below fall into two categories: study tools and storyline tools. That is, some of the tools deal mainly with observation, carefully focusing our interpretation on understanding both a text in its context and the author's original intent. These exegetical tools help us get the meaning out of a text. In some ways, they emphasize the human author and the specific passage. Making good use of study tools begins with prayerfully and carefully observing the biblical text. That's what we mean by *zooming in*.

Other tools are storyline tools. They help us see where a text fits into the storyline of the whole Bible and how it contributes to the culmination of that storyline in the person and

work of Jesus Christ. In some ways, their emphasis is on the divine author and the whole Bible. That's what we mean by *zooming out*.

When “doing” biblical theology there are at least five “interpretive lenses” through which we may humbly examine and rightly interpret passages. These lenses, like guardrails, keep us on the right path.

Helpfully, these five interpretive lenses all begin with the letter C:

1. Context
2. Covenant
3. Canon
4. Character of God
5. Christ

Context

The first step in doing biblical theology is reading contextually. Context is the first interpretive lens through which to examine and understand any biblical text. An understanding of *any* biblical text begins by reading it carefully in context by using the grammatical-historical method of interpretation.

This method includes two contexts that are essential for understanding Old Testament texts: historical and literary.

1. *Historical context*. What did the passage mean to its original audience? The original, historical meaning of a passage provides the only objective point of control against deriving from the text all kinds of subjective and arbitrary messages. Whenever the plain meaning is abandoned, control over

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interpretation is gone, and Scripture comes to mean anything the interpreter sees in it.

You may faithfully ascertain the historical context of a passage by asking several questions:

- Who was the author?
- Who was the author's original audience?
- When was this text written? Are there any historical markers in the biblical text itself that would indicate this?
- What needs of his hearers did the author seek to address?
- What was the author's intended meaning for his original audience?

Consider, for example, the value of historical context when studying the book of Lamentations. These poems of lament were written following the Babylonians' destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC (cf. Jeremiah 52). Knowing this historical context is vital for correctly interpreting and applying the book.

2. *Literary context.* Once a proper historical context has been established, you are ready to study the passage's literary context. First determine what kind of text you are interpreting.

In the Old Testament, you will want to determine if the passage you are studying is narrative, poetry, prophecy, law, wisdom, or apocalyptic. The New Testament can be divided into three genres. The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) are historical accounts of the life of Jesus. They each present Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of God to send a Savior for his people. After the Gospels,

we find the historical narrative of the church's founding and expansion in the book of Acts. Both Acts and the four Gospels are a kind of history.

Following those books we find the Epistles, or letters. They were written to teach Christians what it means to follow Christ.

The final New Testament genre, apocalyptic literature, consists of only one book: Revelation. John, the book's author, offers a vision of the end times in order to prepare and encourage believers to live today for Christ.

Part of what it means to do your best in rightly handling the word of truth is recognizing a book's genre and letting it shape how you read, interpret, and apply it. Once you've determined the genre, then you want to examine how the passage is organized. Begin by studying the words and grammar of the passage itself. Look for any clear structural markers, words or phrases that are repeated, and take careful note of the passage's tone.

Studying a passage in context requires us to get a clear sense of what the passage means in both its near and far literary contexts. What comes right before the text? What comes after? The near context concerns what the verse, sentence, paragraph, and chapter mean and how they relate to one another. The far context concerns what the passage means in light of the entire book.

Context is king. It's been said that a text without a context is a pretext to a proof-text. So always begin by looking at the text through the lens of its Holy Spirit-inspired context, both historical and literary.

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Covenant

Once you've read a passage in its context, you need to read it covenantally. God's covenants have been called the steel girders that support the Christ-centered story of Scripture. So it is important to note any textual structures that mark the covenantal developments of God's plan. After getting a sense of the historical and literary contexts, you want to study the text through the lens of covenant. God's plan of salvation is revealed progressively throughout Scripture, culminating with Jesus Christ. The way God reveals this plan develops like a seed growing into a tree. And recognizing where the passage you're studying fits into this covenantal development is crucial to proper interpretation.

As we saw in chapter 3, throughout the Bible, beginning in the book of Genesis, God established relationships with specific people at specific times by means of covenants. The biblical covenants include

- the Adamic (Genesis 1–2; Hos. 6:7),
- the Noahic (Gen. 9:8–17),
- the Abrahamic (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–14),
- the Mosaic (Exodus 19–25),
- the Davidic (2 Samuel 7), and
- the new covenant (Jer. 31:27–34; Ezek. 36:24–28; Matt. 26:27–30).

So when you interpret passages in Scripture, it's necessary to determine what covenants govern God's people at particular points in the biblical story. Stare at your passage through the lens of covenant. For example, how would you interpret and apply the following Old Testament passages?

- the instructions to Noah about building the ark
- the land promises to Abraham
- the dietary laws in Leviticus
- the promises of divine protection to David

Each of these texts is expressly related to a biblical covenant. Knowing where the passage of Scripture falls in the covenantal storyline of Scripture is crucial to understanding and interpreting rightly.

Correctly identifying the biblical covenant that's associated with any Old Testament text will also help you place the passage within the Bible's redemptive-historical plot line:

Creation ⇒ Fall ⇒ Redemption ⇒ New Creation

Every event in Scripture can be plotted on this redemptive-historical road map. The covenantal storyline helps you navigate both where your text is and where you are in God's redemptive plan.

Understanding the covenantal context is also particularly useful in the *application* of the Old Testament. For example, how would you understand and apply Leviticus 19:19, "You shall not . . . wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material"? We can't move directly from the text to our lives, for the simple reason that we don't live under the Mosaic covenant as it pertains to apparel. This law was given under the covenant with Moses and applied to Israel for the purpose of setting the nation apart as a holy and separate people. More broadly, this command is part of a group of commands in Leviticus 19 that call Israel to conform to God's holiness by emulating the

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divisions in his creation and by keeping separate from the pagan practices of the surrounding nations.

But as believers, we know Christ has come and perfectly fulfilled the Mosaic law and inaugurated the new covenant through his sacrificial death and resurrection. Yet the church, like Israel, is also called to be a holy people even as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:14–16). Under the new covenant, what marks us off as God’s chosen people indwelt by God’s Spirit is that we are being made pure and blameless in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

So, when you interpret any biblical text, ask and answer the question, Where is this passage within the Bible’s covenantal storyline?

Canon

The next interpretive lens to keep in mind when doing biblical theology is the lens of canon. This means you always want to remember the principle that Scripture is the best interpreter of itself. You want to read your passage and look for textual connections to other parts of Scripture.

The best way to make these connections is to use a Bible with a cross-reference system. The cross-references in most Bibles will help clue you in to relevant quotations, allusions, and connections from other portions of Scripture.

If you’ve ever read through the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi, have you noticed that the Old Testament is full of itself? By that, we mean that the later Old Testament writers frequently allude to, echo, or refer readers back to previous passages in the canon. For example, the Psalms often refer to

events recorded in the Pentateuch (see Psalms 8, 95). The latter portion of the book of Daniel (chaps. 9–12) is a vision Daniel received that helps interpret a prophecy given originally to Jeremiah (Jer. 25:1–12; Dan. 9:2).

So when you are reading any biblical text, ask yourself, What connections does the author make to the rest of the Bible? Check the cross-references in your Bible, and use them to help get a grasp of what the passage means in the context of the entire canon.

What's more, when you're interpreting an Old Testament text that's later quoted in the New Testament, by all means, follow the New Testament's lead. Ask yourself, How does the New Testament author's understanding of this passage impact my own interpretation?

Reading canonically requires us to read carefully. Here are five things to look for as we do:

1. *Themes*. Look for ways your passage fits into the major biblical themes that stretch from Genesis to Revelation. Themes like kingship, creation, sacrifice, son, faith, grace, and glory will help you put your text in its appropriate canonical context because they span the entire canon.

2. *Prophecy*. Look back and look forward! Expect multilevel fulfillment of some prophecy. Tracing Old Testament prophecies to their fulfillment in Christ is a wonderful way to make canonical connections.

3. *Typology*. Typology analyzes patterns in Scripture. These

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patterns might show up in an event, a person, or an institution in the Old Testament that points forward and is fulfilled in the New Testament. Scripture's historical patterns teach truths about the King and his kingdom.

For example, Adam was a type of Christ: "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come" (Rom. 5:14). When Paul describes to the church at Corinth the wilderness wanderings of Israel, he says, "Now these things happened to them as an *example*, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). The Passover lamb was a type that pointed to an even greater spotless Lamb who would be slain to rescue the people of God through an even greater exodus (Ex. 12:1–13; John 1:36; 19:36; 1 Cor. 5:7–8; 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:6).

Typology is not the same thing as allegory, which makes arbitrary and mere linguistic connections between a symbol and the thing symbolized. For example, the scarlet cord that was lowered from the wall of Jericho by Rahab the harlot is not a reference to the blood of Christ. A surface resemblance between two things in Scripture doesn't make it a type. Perhaps the safest way to establish a type is to let the biblical authors have their say by rooting the type explicitly in the biblical text itself.

4. *Promise and fulfillment.* God is always faithful to his promises. Many of the promises of God in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the New. In the New Testament, you want to look backward to see the original promise and note its fulfill-

ment. Is it partially fulfilled now and awaiting complete fulfillment? Or has the promise been completely realized? Be alert to the *already-not yet* aspects of some promises fulfilled by Christ the King.

5. *Continuity and discontinuity.* What is the same as before, and what has changed? Is the author highlighting differences or similarities in the passage? For example, if you are teaching Genesis 17, where God commands Abraham concerning circumcision, the canonical context leads you to consider the discontinuity found in the New Testament in a passage like Galatians 6:15: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” What has changed between Genesis 17 and Galatians 6? What is the same? Considering these questions will help you begin to see canonical connections more clearly and point you toward the coming of Christ as central to the biblical story.

The Character of God

One thing that doesn't change when we read the Bible is the character of God. So we need to read theologically. We must ask:

- What does this passage reveal about God?
- What attributes of God does this passage highlight?
- What theological themes are found in this passage?
- What do these theological themes teach me about Christ the King?

The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of

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Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). Therefore, we must take special note when reading biblical texts that speak of who God is and what God is like.

Ask, What does this text teach me about the character of God? This lens is incredibly useful when studying the Psalms. For example, much of Psalm 90 is simply Moses’s reflection on God’s unchanging character. God is eternal and everlasting (90:2, 4); he is sovereign over life and death as the mighty Creator (90:2–3, 5–6); he is a God of holy wrath (90:7–8, 11); and he is a God of mercy, pity, and steadfast love (90:13–14), who is gloriously powerful and beautiful (90:16–17). So take note and marvel at the character of God.

Christ

All that we’ve considered so far culminates with this final interpretive lens. We’ve saved the best, as it were, for last.

We must read Christologically. No matter what passage you are teaching from, you must always ask how it relates to the person and work of Christ. Every time we open the Bible, we should labor to understand where this text fits into the big story. We’ve seen that Jesus is the Hero; so we must ask questions like

- What does this passage reveal about Jesus Christ, his life, and his work?
- Does this text point forward to Christ’s first coming?
- Does it anticipate Christ’s return?
- How does the gospel affect my understanding of the text?
- How does the text anticipate or reflect upon the gospel?

As we saw in chapter 2 (see especially p. 24, “The Greatest Bible Study Ever”), this Christocentric (or Christ-centered) way of reading Scripture, particularly the Old Testament, was taught by Jesus himself.

CONCLUSION

The Bible is the most valuable thing this world affords. In it, you will find heavenly wisdom and the lively oracles of the living God. May God make us faithful to set our hearts to study the Word of God, to put it into practice, and to teach it to others (Ezra 7:10). And if we are to be found faithful interpreters of God’s Word, then we must help our people to know and love Jesus from all the Scriptures.

That’s how biblical theology helps us. That’s how biblical theology transforms the teaching ministry of the local church.

But that’s not all.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY SHAPES A CHURCH'S MISSION

The Bible is a long and glorious God-breathed book. The aim of the little book you've been reading is to help you to better understand the main message of Scripture. This is vital because missing the point of the Bible produces false gospels and false churches. It also distorts the church's mission. You may remember we began with several case studies, and we're now in position to evaluate each of these according to the scriptural storyline laid out in chapters 3 and 4.

THE PROSPERITY-GOSPEL CHURCH

Churches that espouse a prosperity gospel dishonor Christ and diminish the Christian's hope. Christ is dishonored by this deadly misunderstanding in many ways. Instead of magnifying who Jesus is and what he has done, proponents of this heretical view make Jesus and trusting in him the means to a worldly end. The story of Scripture makes clear that the biggest

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problem sinners face in this life isn't unemployment, discouragement, or cancer; it's the eternal wrath of a holy and good God. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him" (John 3:36).

God the Father sent his beloved Son into the world not to make us rich in this life but to reconcile us to himself forever. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Rather than reveling in Jesus—the one in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3; Col. 2:3)—prosperity-gospel preachers make the empty promises of health, wealth, and happiness. Disciples of Jesus, they say, will all experience these blessings in abundance *in this world*.

But the suffering servant made a much different promise to his followers: "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33).

Biblical theology helps us understand that Jesus Christ is to be faithfully proclaimed as the end, the goal, and the centerpiece of Scripture, since "all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus is the Hero, not any of us.

As the seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ is the one in whom God fulfills the promises made to Abraham. Paul tells us this: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, has come to create a people from all the nations for his own praise through his

life, death, and resurrection. And he gives his Holy Spirit to all who trust in him as the pledge and seal of a promised future inheritance (Eph. 1:13–14). Therefore, it's not the awesome strength of our faith but the amazing grace of our Savior that secures these blessings for us. Distorting this dishonors Jesus.

The Christian's hope is also diminished by the prosperity gospel and local churches who teach it. Biblical theology helps us understand that believers in Jesus live in this age as those "on whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11). Christians live between the times, in the tension of the *already* and the *not yet*. Christ has *already* come, but he has *not yet* come again to fully establish his forever kingdom. Jesus already defeated death two thousand years ago by his atoning death and triumphant resurrection and ascension, yet we still await the day when death shall be no more (Rev. 21:4).

So, expectant, sober-minded waiting ought to characterize the posture of Christ's servants who long for their Master's return (1 Pet. 1:14). This biblical hope helps us see through the lie of prosperity-gospel preachers and churches that are promising your best life now.

The believer's best life isn't *now*. Our *best life* arrives when our *blessed hope* appears. This hope isn't found in financial security or in a clean bill of health from a doctor. It isn't found in a new car or in a promotion at work.

Our blessed hope is nothing less than "the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:13–14).

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We suffer in this fallen world, waiting for the glory that will be revealed. We were reminded of this earlier, when we said in chapter 4, “Believers suffer now, but they will be glorified in Christ when he returns. This glorious hope, even amid difficult trials and persecutions, inspires lives of trust and obedience to our Lord and King” (see p. 66, “The King Reigns”). When evaluated by biblical theology, the hope of the prosperity gospel proves to be hopeless. The Christian’s hope is *in Christ*, and this hope finds its fulfillment when believers are finally *with Christ*, in whose presence is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.¹

THE CIVIL-GOSPEL CHURCH

All too often Christians cite “precious and very great promises” (2 Pet. 1:4) from the Bible, only to misapply them. One form of this gross misinterpretation of Scripture occurs in churches that exist to proclaim the civil gospel, a message concerned mainly with “God and country.” This misinterpretation of the Bible’s promises stems from a failure to understand how the Bible’s covenants culminate in Christ and his church. And this distortion of Scripture’s meaning results in a distortion of the church’s mission.

How does biblical theology guard against the civil gospel? Take, for example, the oft-quoted promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14. We have heard Christians apply this promise directly to the United States of America, giving little attention to the near and far contexts of the passage. Solomon, the son of David and the king of Israel, had just finished the temple-building project: “All that Solomon had planned to do in the house of

the LORD and in his own house he successfully accomplished” (2 Chron. 7:11). The Lord appeared to Solomon in the night and spoke to him (2 Chron. 7:12). Then we read the following:

When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chron. 7:13–14)

One clue that this conditional promise is uniquely intended for God’s ancient people, Israel, is found in verse 13. King Solomon had mentioned the same temporal divine judgments for Israel’s sin—drought, the destruction of crops, and deadly disease—earlier in his dedication prayer for the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 6:26, 28). The careful reader of the Old Testament will also recognize this cluster of curses in the list of God’s warnings spoken to Israel even before they entered into the Promised Land (Deut. 28:20–24).

God issued many promises and warnings to his ancient people, conditioned upon their obedience. If Israel trusted the Lord and faithfully obeyed the voice of their God, then God’s blessings would overtake them. But if they acted in unbelief and failed to obey his good word, then the result would be judgment and exile (Deut. 28:63–64). Despite God’s clear warnings to Moses and to David and to Solomon, Israel sinned grievously, and eventually the kingdom was divided, the temple was destroyed, and the people of God were sent into exile, just as God had promised.

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Earlier we considered the role of Israel in God's unfolding plan of salvation. We said in chapter 3:

Israel, whom God called his firstborn son (Ex. 4:22), was to be a kind of priestly representative to the world, just like Adam. Notice what the Lord said of them: "If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:4-6). God intended the holiness of Israel to reflect the holiness of their King: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). By trusting and obeying the Lord's good words, Israel would be a unique people who displayed the wisdom of their King to all the peoples of the earth. By keeping and doing the commandments of the King, the people of Israel would display God's wisdom to a watching world (Deut. 4:4-6)." (see p. 41, "The King Commands")

As the biblical story progressed, we saw that where Israel failed, Jesus, the true seed of Abraham, proved himself to be the faithful Son of God. He redeemed a people for himself. And this people, his church, includes both Jews and Gentiles, united by faith in the gospel of Christ. God's church displays his manifold wisdom to heaven (Eph. 3:10) and declares his matchless worth to the world. The apostle Peter describes the church as

a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet. 2:9-10)

So biblical theology helps us understand that neither America nor any other nation on the planet today is God's holy nation; the church is. America isn't a city set upon a hill; the church is.

This guards churches from falsely thinking that the mission of the church is promoting the healing of America or whatever nation you might be from. Instead, followers of Christ seek to be a blessing to all nations by declaring the good news (Acts 8:4) and by living as servants of God (1 Pet. 1:13–17) no matter where they are sovereignly situated (Acts 17:26).

THE SOUP-KITCHEN CHURCH

Keeping the whole story of Scripture in view can help churches better emphasize what God emphasizes in regard to the church's mission. We considered the example of the "Soup-Kitchen Church" in chapter 1 (p. 21). What could possibly be wrong with feeding the hungry, or caring for the homeless, or ministering to the poor? Shouldn't believers in Christ seek to relieve the suffering around them and seek to do good to their neighbors when and where they are able?

Of course! And local churches can prioritize these kinds of mercy ministries and mobilize members to meet these needs. Mercy ministry is a beautiful opportunity to meet urgent needs while pointing sinners to the remedy of the most urgent need of all, the need to be made right with our holy Creator through faith in Jesus Christ.

We saw this in chapter 4:

Those who refuse to obey Christ's worldwide summons to repent face an awful judgment "when the Lord Jesus is revealed

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from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thess. 1:7–8). When the King returns, the worldwide rebellion against his good and right and holy reign will be crushed. Jesus declares that for “the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:6–8).” (see p. 71, “The King Returns”)

So biblical theology forces us to evaluate the church’s mercy ministries today in light of the last day. When we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we certainly want to hear the King answer on that day, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40).

But we also want to ensure that our churches don’t just give away free soup. We’re called to freely give away something that is able to sustain and satisfy eternally.

Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.
(Matt. 4:4)

As wonderful as mercy ministries are, these Christ-honoring efforts cannot replace and should not diminish the primacy of the proclamation of the gospel in the mission of the church. The gospel alone is the power of God for salvation for all who believe (Rom. 1:16). And the gospel alone can remove the awful threat of eternal suffering.

Biblical theology helps the church keep this sobering reality ever in view.

THE IMMORALITY-AFFIRMING CHURCH

Scripture exhorts believers to urgently strive for the holiness without which we will not see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). But sadly many churches around the world today are urgently pursuing and affirming and approving actions that God's Word condemns as sinful (Rom. 1:32; 1 Cor. 6:9–10).

Instead of being conformed to this world, God's people are called to be transformed by the renewal of their minds (Rom. 12:2). The church of Jesus Christ is warned, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Yet there are many immorality-affirming churches that appear to be chiefly concerned with receiving the loving approval of the world.

Biblical theology helps us to remember that the church's mission will always be at odds with the world. The church of Jesus Christ consists of repentant, baptized believers in Jesus Christ who've been forgiven of all of their sins and washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rom. 6:1–4). By declaring allegiance to King Jesus through faith in the gospel, believers face the opposition of the world, the flesh, and the Devil. This means the mission of the church won't be easy.

We were reminded of this reality back in chapter 4:

The mission Jesus gave to his churches is a difficult and costly one. Following him in faith and obedience will certainly require enduring persecution and suffering for the sake of the gospel. But as believers look forward in the hope of his return, believers also look back and remember that the One who is now risen and exalted on high was also the servant who suffered and died.

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He told his followers, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:10–12). Paul would later write, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Believers suffer in a fallen world—just like everyone else. But unlike those who are still in their sins, followers of King Jesus are promised the additional suffering of facing the enmity of a world that hates the Lord and opposes his people. (see p. 66, “The King Reigns”)

So the aim of the church’s mission isn’t to secure the fleeting applause of this world but rather to cause great rejoicing in heaven (Luke 15:7, 10). When does heaven rejoice? Jesus said, “I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who *repents*” (Luke 15:10).

Repentance means turning from sin, in view of the mercy of God in Jesus. So, in love and humility, Christ’s church stands *against* the world *for the sake of* the world and summons the world to turn from sin and to trust in Jesus Christ alone, because he is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Jesus (John 14:6). The first demand Jesus made of the world was a sovereign call to repent: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent* and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Christ came into this world to save sinners and to call them to repentance. “I have not come to call the righteous,” Jesus said, “but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

It’s no surprise then that, upon receiving the Spirit of Christ at Pentecost, the response of Peter and the rest of the

fledgling church in Jerusalem was to call sinners to repentance and faith (Acts 2:37–41; see also 3:19; 8:22; 26:20). God now “commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). As ambassadors for Christ, we implore the world on behalf of Christ: “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).

Local churches are outposts and embassies of the gospel. Our mission must prioritize the proclamation of the gospel and calling sinners to repentance, humbly remembering that we ourselves are saved by grace alone. “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:11).

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AND MISSION

As you can see, how you view Scripture’s storyline dramatically affects how you view the church’s mission. This is important to note because it will impact your church’s preaching of the Word (see chap. 5), your church’s budget, your pastor’s job description, and how church members are exhorted to live their lives all week.

Let’s think again about the storyline we saw in chapters 3 and 4. Based on that plot line, what would you say the mission of the church is? We can answer that in two ways, based on two different moments in the church’s life: when the church gathers and when it scatters. What, then, is the mission of the church? Jesus said:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the

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name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to *observe all that I have commanded you*. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20)

So in the Great Commission, Jesus calls his disciples *to make* disciples and *to be* disciples.²

First and foremost, then, our mission is *to make* disciples. When the church is gathered in our corporate life together, we need to prioritize disciple-making ministry.

When the church gathers, the assembly of God’s people centers upon God’s Word. We read the Word, preach the Word, pray the Word, sing the Word, and “see” the Word in the gospel ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.³ When we gather, we want to emphasize proclaiming Christ from all the Scriptures, because “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Pastors seek to

equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (Eph. 4:12–14)

When the church gathers, we need to take church membership seriously. This will entail carefully obeying Christ’s commands related to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The faithful practice of the biblical ordinances goes hand in hand with the congregation’s responsibility to receive members, as well

as the practice of church discipline (Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:1–13). The gathered church, distinct and holy and set apart from the world, displays an otherworldly, gospel-fueled love for one another that, by God's grace, wins the world. "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Our mission is to make disciples of our risen King, through his gospel and in the power of his Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Second, our mission is *to be* disciples. This is what we're called to do all week, both individually and with other members of the church.

When the church scatters, we seek to be disciples of Jesus who scatter the saving message of his grace wherever we go because "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). We pray for the Lord to rescue our lost family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers (Rom. 10:1). We boldly and humbly share the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, because, again, "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17), and because the gospel alone is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

When the church scatters, we approach all our various vocations as ways to honor our King. This means seeking to love the Lord and to love our neighbors in every sphere of our lives. Being a disciple of the King means that no matter where you are, you are living for his glory and working for him. "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your

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reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24). These efforts are done not in isolation but rather as part of the fellowship and community of the local church.

Seeking to be Christ’s disciples means that we recognize the importance of family while not making an idol of it. It means approaching concerns about justice and politics in a way that is both faithful and careful not to bind the consciences of brothers and sisters in Christ in partisan and tactical matters.

In all things, being a disciple means seeking to glorify God by doing good and aiming to honor Christ in all things. Peter writes:

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Pet. 2:12–17)

In these ways Christ’s church, gathered and scattered, seeks to *make* disciples and to *be* disciples until he comes and the earth is filled with the knowledge of his glory.

CONCLUSION

We can fail to notice what is gloriously beautiful, even when it's right in front of our eyes.

On January 12, 2007, a man emerged from the Washington, DC, Metro station at L'Enfant Plaza and positioned himself next to a trash can. The young man wore a T-shirt, jeans, and a baseball cap. He removed a violin from a small case and then placed the open case in front of him, facing the pedestrian traffic. Then the man began to play.

It was 7:51 a.m. on a Friday, the middle of the morning rush hour. For the next forty-three minutes, the man performed six classical pieces, as nearly 1,100 people passed by. Would any of these people stop to enjoy the music?

The fiddler standing against the bare wall outside the Metro wasn't your normal street performer. His name is Joshua Bell, one of the finest classical musicians in the world. He was a musical prodigy at age four and is now an acclaimed virtuoso. He packs out concert halls around the world. The music that Bell played that morning was far from ordinary.

Over those forty-three minutes, Bell played masterpieces that have endured for centuries, some of the most elegant music ever written. And he played this beautiful music on one of the most valuable violins ever made. Bell's

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violin is a Stradivarius, handcrafted in 1713, and it's worth \$3.5 million.

On that Friday back in 2007, over a thousand people had a free, front-row ticket to a beautiful concert by one of the world's most famous musicians—but only if they had the eyes to see and the ears to hear in order to enjoy this astounding privilege. And yet, only a handful of people in the Metro that morning stopped to listen and enjoy Bell's glorious music.¹

We all can relate to this. The busyness of life, hurrying along to the next thing, and living nonstop until you drop can have the unintended effect of blinding us to what's really important, what's really beautiful, and what's really precious, even if it happens to be right in front of us. Life in this fallen world can easily inoculate our hearts from feeling wonder and awe, even when we have the privilege of beholding something that's truly amazing and astounding and gloriously beautiful.

I (Nick) experience this sometimes when I read the Bible. Perhaps you do too. Even though I know God's Word is more pleasant than honey and more precious than gold (Ps. 19:10), so often in practice I struggle to believe this to be the case. I miss the glory that's right in front of me. I fail to stop and patiently, prayerfully listen to the symphony of the Scriptures.

Yet it remains our humble hope and prayer to God that, while reading this book, you've tasted and seen something of the wonder and awe and profound privilege of being able to know and love Jesus Christ as he has been revealed in all the Holy Scriptures. We hope and pray that you understand more fully why biblical theology is so wonderful. Jesus Christ is the

fountain from whom all blessings flow, and biblical theology is the scriptural map that helps guide us to this ever-flowing fountain. Little by little, the Holy Spirit helps us to see how the glorious map of Scripture guides us toward our risen and reigning King and his plan to redeem a blood-bought people for his own glory and praise.

Just like those disciples on the Emmaus road, we hope and pray that our eyes and our minds may be fully opened (Luke 24:31, 45) to *recognize* Jesus in all the Scriptures, in order that we all might fully *love* him with all of our hearts from all the Scriptures (Luke 24:32). Our King deserves nothing less.

The apostle Peter wrote in his first letter:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Pet. 1:10–12)

The glorious salvation we have in Christ was prophesied and predicted by the Old Testaments prophets of God and is presently the intense preoccupation of the angels of God. Ponder the privileged position we have in Christ! And then, by God's Spirit, continue to humbly and prayerfully search his beautiful Word to discover even more of the riches of his glorious grace in Jesus.

Appendix

ADDITIONAL BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL EXAMPLES

When I (Nick) am learning something new, I often say, “Please show me; don’t just tell me.” Below, you’ll find a series of biblical theology examples, drawn from a variety of biblical genres. After briefly setting each passage in its context, I will show how biblical theology helps illuminate the passage in a Christ-centered way.

We’ll consider, first, three Old Testament texts and, later, three New Testament texts to see how they might be read and understood through the lens of biblical theology.

“BLESSED SHALL YOU BE IN THE CITY” (DEUT. 28:1–6)

We’ve seen that a text without a context is a pretext to proof-text. In other words, if we interpret a text of Scripture apart from its context, we can make it say something it actually doesn’t say.

Take, for example, the following verses from the end of Deuteronomy:

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And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. (28:1–6)

Prosperity-gospel teachers might twist the meaning of this passage into saying something like this: “God promises you blessings! The Lord promises that he will exalt you. He promises that blessings will overtake you. He promises that you will be blessed in your city and blessed in your work. He promises that your children will be blessed and your crops and your cattle and your herds will be blessed. All you have to do is faithfully obey the Lord and do all his commandments and you will be blessed in all these ways: socially, physically, and financially! You can have this blessed life now. Just obey the Lord.”

It’s worth noting that this passage *does* clearly make an inseparable link between obedience and blessing. No obedience, no blessing. But as the story of Israel continues to unfold, it becomes obvious that they will not obey the Lord. Just read the rest of the book of Deuteronomy. Any preacher who sees a prosperity gospel in this passage has lost sight of both its context and the Bible’s storyline.

How does biblical theology help us interpret this passage

faithfully? Let's begin by considering the covenantal context of this passage. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses charges the people of Israel to keep God's word because of the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai. He lays before them both the glorious blessings of obedience (28:1–14) and the horrible curses of disobedience (28:15–68).

Notice how Moses spent considerably more time unpacking the curses than the blessings. This tells us that Moses himself wasn't confident Israel would obey the Lord after Moses died, let alone after Joshua led them into the Promised Land. In fact, when Moses looked into the near future for Israel, he saw disobedience, idolatry, and exile—not faithfulness, blessings, and prosperity.

Israel wasn't obeying the Lord while Moses was alive. Why would this change after his death? The Lord even told Moses that Israel would soon break the covenant he made with them at Sinai through their disobedience and idolatry: "And the LORD said to Moses, 'Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers. Then this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them in the land that they are entering, and they will forsake me and break my covenant that I have made with them'" (Deut. 31:16; see also 31:24–29).

The context of this passage clearly teaches us that the Israelites wouldn't and couldn't be obedient to God's covenant.

Nor can we. Like them, we've earned the curses of God, not his blessings. The law of God requires perfect obedience, but the intentions of both the Israelites' hearts and our own are sinful and inclined toward evil (Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Deut.

31:21). Our only hope for blessing is for someone else to obey perfectly where we all have fallen short, for someone else to bear the curses we deserve for our disobedience, for someone else to give us new hearts that obey and follow God's commands.

Moses understood that what God's people desperately needed was a new covenant. And that's precisely what Deuteronomy 29–30 is all about! Moses looked to the distant future in hope: "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deut. 30:6; see Jer. 31:33; 32:39–40; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26–27; Col. 2:11). In the future, God would establish a new covenant with his people.

But wait—there's even more good news. Someone would come, a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15, 18; Luke 7:16) who would perfectly obey God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength; who would fulfill all the law (Matt. 5:17); who would secure the new covenant blessings for his people (Luke 22:20). His name is Jesus.

But in order to bring his people these blessings, he had to bear their curses. Paul cites Deuteronomy 27:26 in his letter to the Galatians: "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them'" (Gal. 3:10).

And so, Paul says, Jesus Christ, the righteous one, was condemned in our place on the cross: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is writ-

ten, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13–14).

The prosperity gospel and other false messages make the Bible all about us, when in reality it’s all about Christ.

“GOD SITS ON HIS HOLY THRONE” (PS. 47:8)

In chapters 3 and 4, we saw the prominent theme of God’s kingship throughout Scripture. Take, for example, the following verse from the Psalms:

God reigns over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne. (47:8)

Psalm 47 is a summons to the world, to “all peoples” to joyfully praise the Lord (47:1). Why?

For the LORD, the Most High, is to be feared,
a great king over all the earth. (47:2)

The whole earth ought to praise the Lord because he alone is the great King over all the earth. We find the same construction in Psalm 47:6–7. Verse 6 is a summons to sing praise to God, and verse 7 supplies the reason why: “For God is the King of all the earth.”

This brings us to Psalm 47:8:

God reigns over the nations;
God sits on his holy throne.

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This verse teaches that God rules over all the nations. In spite of their unruliness, God reigns over them. The Holy One of Israel sits upon his holy throne. God reigns. The universal reign of God is one of the major themes of Psalms. In fact, entire sections repeat the wonderful chorus, “the LORD reigns!” (see Pss. 93:1; 97:1; 99:1).

The LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods. (Ps. 95:3)

If we zoom out a bit, we see how the theme of God’s kingship highlights the problem of sin. From Genesis 3 onward, Scripture tells the sad story of the nations rebelling against God; they don’t praise the Lord as King. This worldwide rebellion was clearly displayed in the prideful plan to construct the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9): “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth’” (Gen. 11:4). God thwarted the sinful efforts at Babel and instead chose Abram, promising through Abram to make a great name *for himself* (Gen. 12:1–3). As a result, all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abram’s family (Gen. 17:4–6; 22:17–18).

Interestingly, Psalm 47 alludes to the promise given to Abram (Abraham) in its final verse:

The princes of the peoples gather
as the people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
he is highly exalted! (47:9)

This psalm points forward to a day when the nations will acknowledge the God of Israel as the great King of all nations. And what's more, the nations themselves, represented here by "the princes of the peoples," will gather "as the people of the God of Abraham."

The book of Psalms begins with kings raging against God and against his anointed one (Ps. 2:1–3). But Psalm 47:8–9 tells about a day when the leaders of the nations will adore and honor the Lord, the One who sits upon the throne.

And that's precisely what we find at the conclusion of Scripture, in the vision of God's throne in Revelation 4–5. John sees the throne of God in heaven, the throne of the Holy One, the Lord God Almighty, "who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8). And in Revelation 5, John hears the new song about the Lion and the Lamb who sits upon the throne. *He* is worthy of praise. Why?

For you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people
for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation. (5:9)

The worship of the nations was purchased by the blood of the Lamb who reigns and sits upon the throne.

And what is the people's response to such a magnificent act by the Most High? We read:

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying,

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and
ever!" (Rev. 5:13)

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One day, all the nations will “shout to God with loud songs of joy” (Ps. 47:1) because of the Lamb who was slain on their behalf. The Lamb of God, who reigns and sits upon the throne of God, will receive the reward of his suffering: eternal praise from all peoples, joyful adoration from all nations.

“MY SON, IF YOU RECEIVE MY WORDS” (PROV. 2:1–6)

Some parts of the Old Testament seem easier to connect to Christ than others. For example, we may find it easier with a prophecy about the coming Messiah than with a chapter from Proverbs.

So, how do the Wisdom books connect to Christ? Let’s briefly examine Proverbs 2:1–6:

My son, if you receive my words
and treasure up my commandments with you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
For the LORD gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

The main point of these verses seems to be that if you diligently seek wisdom, God will give it. According to this passage, “wisdom” is paralleled with “knowledge and understanding” (2:6), “fear of the LORD,” and “knowledge of God” (2:5). In other

words, Proverbs 2:1–6 is elaborating on Proverbs 1:7: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge.” Wisdom—fearing the Lord—is found in passionately pursuing and listening to the father’s “words,” “commandments,” and “insight.”

Let’s zoom out and consider where this proverb fits into the biblical storyline. In Proverbs 1:1, we discover that King Solomon wrote at least the opening sections of this book. Solomon, David’s son, was anointed as king over Israel. God had promised David that a son of his would mediate God’s rule to the nation, and through the nation to the nations of the world. The nations were to look at Israel—led by a wise king who meditated on God’s Word day and night (Deut. 17:18–20)—and to behold a wise and discerning people (Deut. 4:6).

So in Proverbs, we find God using his specially designated son, Solomon the king, to lead other sons in the way of wisdom. Look at Proverbs 1:8:

Hear, my son, your father’s instruction,
and forsake not your mother’s teaching.

This fatherly wisdom is found in Proverbs 2:1–6, which begins with “My son.” But how does this passage point to Christ?

First, our passage points to Christ by virtue of its authorship. Solomon, a son of David, points forward to the true Son of David who was yet to come.

Second, consider the biblical theme of wisdom and how it was to mark the coming King from David’s line. Solomon, of course, was well known for his wisdom. “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and

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breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:29–30).

The promised Messiah would also be a wise Son, whose wisdom would surpass even that of Solomon. This Son is described as one on whom the Spirit of wisdom and understanding would rest:

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.
And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
(Isa. 11:1–2; see also Isa. 50:4–5)

So, when we turn to the New Testament, we find descriptions of Jesus as a young man filled with wisdom: "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom" (Luke 2:40). Jesus yearned to be in his Father's house (Luke 2:49). Later, he would make explicit the comparison between himself and Solomon by saying, "The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here" (Matt. 12:42; see also Luke 11:31).

After Jesus taught in the synagogue, people responded to him, saying, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?" (Matt. 13:54). The apostle Paul tells us that Christ is both the power of God *and* the wisdom of

God (1 Cor. 1:24), the one in whom is hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

So, the whole book of Proverbs needs to be read with an understanding that only biblical theology can bring: Jesus fulfills both Solomon’s sonship *and* Solomon’s wisdom. This comes through in our passage because we see in the New Testament the boy Jesus seeking out such wisdom from his heavenly Father: “After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:46–47). Even the teachers of the Law were amazed at the understanding of this twelve-year-old named Jesus.

If we’re in Christ, then we know we’ve been adopted as sons. If we’re in Christ, then we know the book of Proverbs doesn’t just give us practical tips for living. It helps us to know what it means to posture our lives in the fear of the Lord and then to walk in his ways as God’s children, so that we might grow in wisdom and stature and blessing, just as Christ did.

God’s wisdom is precious. We must seek it for the treasure it is (Prov. 2:1–5). And if we find wisdom, we are to give God all the glory, because he alone gives wisdom (Prov. 2:6).

Let’s now turn to two familiar stories from the Gospels and a passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

“HE CAME TO THEM, WALKING ON THE SEA” (MARK 6:45–52)

In Mark 6, Jesus performs several miracles that help reveal his identity as the Son of the living God. He feeds the five thousand (6:30–44) and heals the sick (6:53–56). Sandwiched

between these miracles is the episode of Jesus walking on the sea (6:45–52). In this section, we find a somewhat puzzling statement: “And he saw that they [the disciples] were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them” (6:48).

Jesus walks on the sea toward his struggling disciples, and they fail to recognize him. They think he’s a ghost! But why does Mark draw our attention to the fact that Jesus, the one who “came to them, walking on the sea,” also “meant to pass by them”? Biblical theology illuminates our answer to this question.

Mark alludes to Old Testament texts that clarify the true identity of Jesus for his readers. Most study Bibles include cross-references that help readers notice these Old Testament allusions, so make it a habit to look up those references. Let’s briefly examine those canonical connections.

This same verb (“pass by”) is often used in the Old Testament to describe a theophany, that is, a manifestation of the Lord’s presence to his people. At Mount Sinai, the Lord responded to Moses’s request that he might see divine glory by “passing by” him (Ex. 33:17–23; 34:6). God is said to “pass by” Moses in order to reveal his glory indirectly, because “man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:20).

The Lord also “passed by” the prophet Elijah: “And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD” (1 Kings 19:11).

There’s yet another canonical connection to Mark 6:48 found in the book of Job:

How can a man be in the right before God?
If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand times.
He is wise in heart and mighty in strength
—who has hardened himself against him, and
succeeded?—
he who removes mountains, and they know it not,
when he overturns them in his anger,
who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;
who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;
who alone stretched out the heavens
and *trampled the waves of the sea*;
who made the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the chambers of the south;
who does great things beyond searching out,
and marvelous things beyond number.
Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him. (Job 9:2–11)

Notice that the Creator God is the one

who does great things beyond searching out,
and marvelous things beyond number. (9:10)

He alone commands the sun and the stars. And, interestingly, he also is the one who walks upon the waves of the sea. This glorious description of God is connected in verse 11 to a humble confession:

Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.

In other words, this infinitely glorious God is beyond human comprehension. God's glory is mysteriously ungraspable.

What do these canonical connections mean for our understanding of Mark 6:48? Even though Jesus's walking on the sea is a display of his divine glory and power, he remains beyond the full comprehension of his disciples (see Mark 6:51–52). But Jesus's comforting words to the disciples—"It is I [literally, "I AM"]. Do not be afraid" (Mark 6:50)—echo the divine name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, revealed to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14.

And so, Mark is identifying Jesus as the Son of God, the LORD incarnate. The miracles in Mark 6 point to his identity as one who is utterly glorious, who does "marvelous things beyond number," who treads the "waves of the sea." And as we keep reading the Gospel of Mark, we discover that this same Jesus is the one who ultimately reveals himself in all his glory on a bloody Roman cross (Mark 15:39).

"I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD" (JOHN 10)

In John 10, we find Jesus debating the Pharisees (John 9:40). He's just performed an amazing sign in chapter 9, the healing of a man born blind, and now continues to explain his identity to the Pharisees, who refuse to accept his words.

Throughout the chapter, Jesus uses several Old Testament images to paint his messianic self-portrait. In contrast to the "robbers" and "thieves" who came before, Jesus refers to himself as "the good shepherd":

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who

does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:11–16)

Finally, in John 10:19–30, Jesus again addresses the Jews and returns to this sheep/shepherd imagery, declaring:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (10:27–30)

But it's the final statement—"I and the Father are one"—that provokes the shocking response from his hearers: "The Jews picked up stones again to stone him" (10:31).

So Jesus's main point in this section seems to be twofold: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11), and "I and the Father are one" (10:30).

Both the force of his claims and the response of his opponents are illuminated when viewed through the lens of biblical theology. So, what canonical connections might be made from John 10?

By using scriptural cross-references, we quickly discover Jesus's multiple allusions to the prophecy of Ezekiel 34. Here,

the Lord denounces the false shepherds and spiritual leaders of Israel. He says to Ezekiel, “Prophesy against the shepherds” (34:2). The Lord himself is “against the shepherds” (34:10), as Jesus is against the Pharisees.

Two further points emerge from Ezekiel 34. First, the Lord himself will be the Good Shepherd of his people: “I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD” (34:15). The Lord himself will shepherd his people and will feed his sheep (34:14).

Second, the coming Davidic king will also be the good shepherd of his people: “And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken” (34:23–24). The coming Messiah will shepherd his people and feed his sheep.

So the prophecy of Ezekiel 34 raises a tantalizing question: Will the future good shepherd of God’s people be the Lord himself, or will he be a future Davidic king? Jesus provides the answer to this mystery in John 10. Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Davidic King, who is the Good Shepherd of his people. But Jesus is also “one with the Father.” He is God himself. In other words, the Lord and the Davidic shepherd in Ezekiel 34 are the same person. Jesus is the eternal Word made flesh (John 1:14), who was in the beginning with God and who was God (John 1:1).

In Ezekiel 34, the Lord also makes a promise: “I will rescue my flock” (34:22). How will this rescue happen? Again, Jesus provides the answer in John 10: “I am the good shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (10:11). In Jesus, the Word made flesh and the promised Messiah, the hope of Ezekiel 34 is fulfilled. In Jesus, God’s people have found their Good Shepherd—and as the Good Shepherd, Jesus seeks his people and feeds his people. And most amazingly of all, Jesus then rescues his people by laying down his life for them on the cross. Jesus therefore is the Good Shepherd who will care for his people forever (Rev. 7:17).

“HE HAS RESCUED US FROM THE DOMINION OF DARKNESS” (COL. 1:12–14)

The exodus of God’s people from Egypt is the Old Testament’s greatest act of divine deliverance, the pinnacle example of the saving power of the Lord. The Bible’s Old Testament authors often allude back to exodus as a way of reminding God’s people that nothing is impossible with God.

The exodus also becomes a picture of what God will do in the future for his people. You can read these “new exodus” themes in the prophetic books, especially Isaiah (Isa. 11:11, 15–16; 14:1–2; 62:11–12). They picture an even greater rescue operation that is to come, a bright thread woven through the tapestry of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation.

This brings us to Colossians 1:12–14. As we’ll see, the apostle Paul draws upon this exodus theme to encourage his readers to give thanks to God the Father for what he’s accomplished through Jesus Christ, his beloved Son. These verses are the concluding segment of Paul’s opening prayer.

Though Paul didn’t start the church at Colossae (cf. Col. 2:1–5), he delighted in the gospel work God was doing in their

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midst. So he begins his letter, as he often does, by thanking God (1:3–8) and interceding for the congregation (1:9–14). Immediately after this prayer, Paul transitions into a glorious explanation about the preeminence of the Son of God, the one who is Lord of both creation (1:15–17) and new creation (1:18–20).

His prayer on behalf of the Colossians brims with echoes of the exodus:

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (1:9–14)

Let's investigate this passage's several textual connections to the exodus.

In verse 12, Paul says God “has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in [the kingdom of] light.” God has “qualified” or “fitted” a people for an inheritance. Notice the “you”; it's important because Paul switches to “us” in the next verse. In verse 12, he seems to be saying to his primarily Gentile audience in Colossae, God has made “you”—even you—into his heirs! In Christ, God has made Gentiles heirs, saints in the kingdom of light.

This language of “heirs” and “inheritance” is used in the Old Testament to refer to Jews under the old covenant (Num. 26:52–56). But here, Paul applies the same language to refer to believing *Gentiles* under the *new* covenant. What has God done to accomplish this for his people? Paul tells us: “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13–14).

In other words, God’s gift of an inheritance to his new covenant people has been secured by a new and greater exodus. He has rescued and transferred his people from a dark dominion into his glorious kingdom, the kingdom of his beloved Son.

The language of verse 13 recalls what God said to Moses in Exodus 6:6–8:

Say therefore to the people of Israel, “I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.”

Israel was in bondage to a cruel master in Egypt. They were enslaved. But God rescued Israel from bondage by his mighty hand (Ex. 14:30). And now, Paul says, God has done something in Christ that’s even greater. He has now delivered his people from an even greater bondage and an even greater darkness

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(Acts 26:18). How? Through the cross of Jesus: “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him” (Col. 2:15). In Christ, God’s people “have redemption” (1:14). Christ secured his people’s liberation from bondage by becoming the redeeming ransom for his people on the cross (Mark 10:45).

How does biblical theology make a difference in our study of Colossians 1:12–14? Paul wants the Colossians (and us!) to give thanks to God for our great salvation. To that end, he borrows exodus language to describe the new exodus God has performed through Christ’s death on the cross. Paul wants his readers to link these two great saving works of God: the exodus and the cross.

But he also wants to make sure we see the cross of Christ as greater than even the exodus. This should fill our mouths with thanksgiving and our hearts with praise. Jesus understood himself, as God’s Son, to be following in the footsteps of Israel, God’s firstborn “son” in the Old Testament. Like Israel, Jesus came out of Egypt (Matt. 2:13–15). Like Israel, Jesus passed through waters. Like Israel, Jesus was tested in the wilderness.

In the Gospel of Luke, the saving work of Christ is described in the language of the exodus. How? In Luke 9:22, Jesus tells his disciples that he’s going to Jerusalem to suffer and die and be raised to life on the third day to save his people. Just a few verses later, Luke refers to what Jesus was about to accomplish in his “departure,” his exodus (9:31).

This exodus Jesus was about to perform would occur in Jerusalem during the Passover. Jesus offered himself on the cross as the spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of

world (John 1:29), and he fulfilled all the types and shadows of the exodus and Passover. His blood was shed to cover the sins of his people, absorbing the wrath they deserved—and yet, none of his bones were broken (Ex. 12:46; John 19:36). Christ, as our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed, bringing a new and greater exodus for his people (1 Cor. 5:7).

Christian, are you thankful for this great salvation, for this new and greater exodus that God has worked through his Son on your behalf? The main application we should draw from this passage is to remember and give thanks.

Why does Paul use exodus language in the context of a prayer of thanksgiving? It's in part because of Israel's response to what God had done for them. Instead of giving thanks, they grumbled against God; they forgot his saving works. Paul's allusions to the exodus are given in the context of beckoning the Colossians to give thanks for the new exodus they've experienced in Christ.

Israel was redeemed, yet they grumbled. In Christ, we've been redeemed. Will we give thanks—or will we murmur and complain?

NOTES

Chapter 3: What Is the Bible's Big Story? Part 1

1. Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 43.

Chapter 4: What Is the Bible's Big Story? Part 2

1. See Graeme Goldsworthy, "Kingdom of God," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 618.

Chapter 5: Biblical Theology Shapes a Church's Teaching

1. This analogy was modified from Andrew Errington, as quoted in Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 25.

2. Sinclair Ferguson, *From the Mouth of God* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014), 111.

Chapter 6: Biblical Theology Shapes a Church's Mission

1. For a fuller treatment of the deadly errors of the prosperity gospel, see David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: How the Prosperity Gospel Overshadows the Gospel of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011, 2017).

2. For a fuller treatment of this paradigm, see Jonathan Leeman, "The Soteriological Mission," in *Four Views on the Church's Mission*, ed. Jason S. Sexton (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).

3. See Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 81–86.

Notes

Conclusion

1. Gene Weingarten, "Pearls before Breakfast," *Washington Post Magazine*, April 8, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Below you will find books, articles, and audio resources to help you grow in your study of biblical theology. These resources are listed in progressive order, from beginner to more advanced.

Helm, David, with Gail Schoonmaker. *The Big Picture Story Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.

Roberts, Vaughan. *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Bruno, Chris. *The Whole Story of the Bible in 16 Verses*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

Helm, David R. *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014.

Charles Simeon Trust Workshops, <http://www.simeontrust.org/>.

Goldsworthy, Graeme. *The Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament*. Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994.

Sailhamer, John H. *NIV Compact Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009.

Recommended Resources

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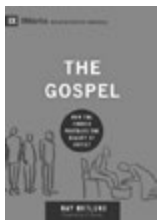
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