

- God is faithful to his promises through long history.
- He enlists his people as troops in the redemptive reconquest of a world gone bad.
- All the promises of God find their “Yes” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20).

You “apply” a list of ancient names and numbers by extension, not directly. Your love for God grows surer and more intelligent when you ponder the *kind* of thing this is, rather than getting lost in the blizzard of names or numbers.

The second example presents a mid-level challenge. Psalms are often among the most directly relevant parts of Scripture. But what do you do when Psalm 21:1 says, “O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices”? The psalm is not talking about you, and it is not you talking—not directly. A train of connected truths apply this psalm to you, leading you out of yourself.

First, David lived and wrote these words, but Jesus Christ most fully lived—is now living, and will finally fulfill—this entire psalm. He is the greatest human king singing this song of deliverance; and he is also the divine Lord whose power delivers. We know from the perspective of NT fulfillment that this psalm is overtly by and about Jesus, not about any particular individual.

Second, you participate in the triumph of your King. You are caught up in all that the psalm describes, because you are in this Christ. So pay attention to *his* experience, because he includes you.

Third, your participation arises not as a solo individual but in company with countless brothers and sisters. You most directly apply this psalm by joining with fellow believers in a chorus of heartfelt gladness: “O LORD, *we* will sing and praise your power” (Ps. 21:13). The king’s opening joy in God’s power has become his people’s closing joy.

Finally, figuratively, you are also kingly in Christ. In this sense, Jesus’ experience of deliverance (the entire psalm) does apply to your life. Having walked through the psalm as an expression of the exultant triumph of Christ Jesus himself, you may now make it your experience too. You could even adapt Psalm 21 into the first person, inserting “I/me/my” in place of “the king” and “he/him/his.” It would be blasphemous to do that at first. It is fully proper and your exceeding joy to do this in the end. This is a song in which all heaven will join. As you grasp that your brothers and sisters share this same goal, you will love them and serve their joy more consistently.

God reveals himself and his purposes throughout Scripture. Wise application always starts there.

Conclusion

You started by identifying one passage that speaks persistently, directly, and relevantly into your life. You have seen how both the direct and the indirect passages intend to change you. Learning to wisely apply the harder, less relevant passages has a surprising benefit. Your whole Bible “applies personally.” This Lord is your God; this history is your history; these people are your people; this Savior has brought you in to participate in who he is and what he does. Venture out into the remotest regions of Scripture, seeking to know and love your God better.

Hopefully, you better understand why your most reliable passage so changed your life. Ponder those familiar words once more. You will notice that they also lift you out of self-preoccupation, out of the double evil of sin and misery. God brought his gracious care to you through that passage, and rearranged your life. You love him who first loved you, so you love his other children. And that is how the whole Bible, and each of its parts, applies personally. ◀

Reading the Bible for Preaching and Public Worship

The Bible, as holy Scripture, is the only certain source of God’s words in the entire world. Paul’s statement that “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16; see note) means that all the words of the Bible are God’s words to us. Therefore if we want to hear our Creator and Lord speaking to us, we must continually give attention to the authoritative words of the Bible. This means that the Bible must be the only true foundation and constant guide for all that we do in the life of the church, and the Bible must be central to all that happens in preaching and public worship.

Moses and Jesus confirm how God’s people are to regard his holy Word. On the very day that Moses completed the writing of the Book of the Law, he directed that it be placed beside the ark (Deut. 31:26), sang his final song (the great Song of Moses; Deut. 31:30–32:43), and then declared that “it is no empty word for you, but your very life” (Deut. 32:47). Moses’ declaration set the standard for the primacy and sufficiency of God’s Word (cf. Psalms 19; 119). A millennium and a half later Jesus, the second Moses, after defeating Satan with three deft quotations from Deuteronomy, declared, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). The Scriptures were life to Moses and food to Jesus; as such they together establish the ideal for God’s people and directly

inform the Bible’s use in preaching and public worship. Jesus’ dependence on the sufficiency and potency of God’s Word raised the standard high for all apostolic and post-apostolic preaching and worship.

The Bible’s Use in Preaching

When the apostle Paul instructs his younger colleague Timothy in the conduct of public worship, he places the Bible at its very center: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. . . . Practice these things, immerse yourself in them” (1 Tim. 4:13, 15). Paul’s direction was: read the Word; preach the Word! (Cf. 2 Tim. 4:2.) The early church sought to follow Paul’s exhortation. Justin Martyr, writing c. A.D. 150–155, describes a typical Lord’s Day: “On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has finished, the president speaks, instructing and exhorting the people to imitate these good things” (*First Apology* 1.67). In other words, the practice of these earliest churches was that the Scripture was to be read, and then preaching was to be based on that reading of the Word.

From the text. Paul directs Timothy, “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). “Rightly handling” is a compound word in Greek, in which the first part comes from the Greek word *orthos*—“straight.” The exact charge to Timothy is to impart the word of truth *without deviation and without dilution*—to get it straight and give it straight! The preacher must preach the text, not the idea that brought him to the text. He must stand behind the Bible, not in front of it. He must preach what the passage says, not what he wants it to say.

Good preaching requires prayerfully interpreting the text in its context. This involves using the established rules of interpretation; understanding the text’s application both in its historical setting and in the whole of Scripture; discerning how it is a revelation of Jesus Christ and making the appropriate biblical connections; taking the trip from Jerusalem to one’s own town and coming to see its present relevance; articulating the theme of the text; using stories and illustrations which truly illuminate the text; and employing language that actually communicates in today’s culture.

From the heart. However, the proper use of the Bible in preaching requires more than good hermeneutics and homiletics; it also requires a heart that has been softened and prepared and sanctified by the Word that is to be preached. The Puritan William Ames (1576–1633) expressed it well:

Next to the evidence of truth, and the will of God drawn out of the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation. To this purpose it is very profitable, if besides the daily practice of piety we use serious meditation and fervent prayer to work those things upon our own hearts, which we would persuade others of.

Every appropriation of the truth preached will strengthen the preacher for preaching. Every act of repentance occasioned in his soul by the Word he now preaches will give conviction to his voice.

Jonathan Edwards’s *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (1746) has provided the best explanation of what must take place within the preacher. By “affections” Edwards meant one’s *heart*, one’s *inclinations*, and one’s *will*. As Edwards said, “true religion *consists in a great measure* in vigorous and lively actings and the inclination and will of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the heart.” Edwards demonstrates from a cascade of Scriptures that real Christianity so impacts the affections that it shapes one’s fears, hopes, loves, hatreds, desires, joys, sorrows, gratitudes, compassions, and zeals.

This is what should routinely happen to the preacher: the message should work its way through his whole intellectual and moral being as he prepares for and practices the proclamation of God’s Word. When the message has affected him deeply, then he is ready to preach. Sermon preparation is twenty hours of prayer. It is humble, holy, critical thinking. It is repeatedly asking the Holy Spirit for insight. It is the word penetrating into the depths of the preacher’s own soul. It is ongoing repentance. It is utter dependence. It is a singing heart.

The Bible’s Use in Public Worship

God’s Word deserves great reverence from his people. Isaiah writes, “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2). Therefore when Scripture is read aloud in a worship service, the reader and the congregation should take care to convey the reverent attention that Scripture deserves.

From its earliest days the church gave primacy to the reading of Holy Scripture, as seen in the apostle Paul’s aforementioned charge to Timothy to devote himself to “the public reading of Scripture,” as well as Justin Martyr’s account of the apostolic church’s practice of reading “the memoirs of the apostles and writings of the prophets . . . as long as time permits.” The regular custom soon was to have two extended public readings, one from the OT and one from the NT.

Reading of Scripture. Every Bible-believing church must give preeminence to Scripture in its public services of worship. This means that the Scripture to be expounded should be read aloud, and should be set forth in its full context. After all, the reading of God’s Word is the one place where we can be sure that we are hearing God. Responsive readings can be beneficial because they involve the congregation in voicing the sacred text.

There is substantial wisdom in keeping to the apostolic church’s custom of reading passages from the OT and NT in pairs, as it were, because this practice weekly reaffirms the continuity of the two Testaments, encourages biblical theology, and counters the tendencies of many today to pit the two Testaments against each other. It also substantially contributes to the service as a service of the Word in its unity and fullness.

Congregational response to the reading with a hearty “Amen!” or the time-honored “Thanks be to God” can further elevate the corporate assent to the centrality and authority of God’s Word. Jerome said of the congregational “Amen” in his day that at times it “seemed like a crack of thunder.” How glorious and how good for the soul!

Of course, such attention to God’s Word can also prove ineffective if the reading itself is left to a last-minute assignment, such that the reader fails to prepare mentally and spiritually for what he or she is required to do. All of us have heard the Scripture abused by a reader who hasn’t the faintest idea of the meaning of what he is reading, or by reading too fast, or mispronouncing common words, or by losing his place. This is not to suggest that the Scripture is to be read as dramatically as possible or performed as a reader’s theater. But how God-honoring it is to read God’s Word well, with a prayerful spirit. Pastors and readers can serve their congregations well by prayerfully reading the text a dozen times with pencil in hand *before* reading it to God’s people.

A service of the Word. The Bible’s use in preaching and public worship should be in such a way as to result in a Christ-exalting service of the Word. This requires work by the preacher and the leaders of the congregation, so that God’s Word is read to his glory, the sermon is derived from the faithful exposition of the text reading, and the reading and preaching of the biblical passage is set in the context of songs and hymns and programs that are redolent with the substance of God’s holy Word. ◀

