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Exegetical Necessity

Pastor Adam is preaching about the Lord's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7. He's studied the text carefully. While preaching, he elaborates on the historical and cultural background of David's story in a way that transports his listeners into the moment. He explains David's intent to build a house for the Lord. He creatively imagines what David must have felt when the prophet Nathan returns with a divine "no" from God. He highlights the Lord's amazing promise to David—that instead of David building a house for God, God would build a house for David. Pastor Adam walks the congregation through the entire episode scene-by-scene, highlighting what the text teaches about God and what it teaches about man. Throughout the message, he urges the church to trust in the Lord.

Sounds like an excellent sermon, doesn't it?

Certainly, the sermon is commendable in that it's text-driven, God-centered, and faith-inspiring. But beyond these desirable qualities, we shouldn't call the sermon excellent. At best, the sermon is deficient; at worst, it's a failure. Why? Not because of what Pastor Adam said, but because of what he didn't say. Pastor Adam neglected to interpret and apply the text in light of Jesus. The gospel wasn't present, and the

sermon assumed people could relate to the God of 2 Samuel 7 apart from Christ.

Of all Old Testament Scriptures, 2 Samuel 7 seems like especially fertile ground for preaching Christ. It's not as if the connection between the Davidic covenant and Jesus is obscure. If you're familiar with the Bible, you realize how easy it should be to draw a line between the promise made to David and its fulfillment in Christ. But Pastor Adam drew no line. Perhaps he thought the line was so obvious that he didn't *need* to draw it. Maybe you agree.

By the way, this sermon isn't made-up. I heard it myself. I've changed the preacher's name because I believe in the Golden Rule! And I chose the name Adam because the sermon could have been any man's. I've preached many sermons like it myself. So, yes, I have a rock in my hand right now, but it's not for throwing. Rather, like I said in the Introduction, it's for placing in the shoe of all the Pastor Adams out there.

What about you? Do you think it's unnecessary to preach Christ in every sermon, as long as you speak truthfully about the text itself and encourage people to trust in God?

FOR THE UNCONVINCED

The heart of this handbook is practical methodology. I want to help pastors know *how* to preach Christ from the Old Testament. But before we get to the How, we need to begin with the Why. If you're already convinced from Scripture about the necessity of preaching Christ from the text itself, then feel free to skim or even to skip these first two chapters and move on to Parts 2 and 3 of the book. If, however, you're unconvinced—if you believe Pastor Adam's sermon was just fine—then please keep reading.

It's vital to ask *why* you should preach Christ from the Old Testament. You don't just need a method, you need meaning. You don't just

need a process, you need purpose. If there's anything your preaching of Christ should be, it should be convictional. The preacher ought to feel as if he *must* exalt Jesus. He should feel, like Peter and John, that he "cannot but speak" of Him (Acts 4:20).

Let me show you how I came to believe this.

THE KEY TO INTERPRETING EVERYTHING

We start with the simple but sweeping confession: *Jesus is Lord*. Take a second to ponder the weight of that three-word sentence. Could there be a more persuasive argument for preaching Christ from the Old Testament? If Jesus is Lord, then He is Lord over the Old Testament—and Lord over our Old Testament sermons, too.

But some preachers haven't recognized the Lordship of Christ over the interpretive process. Consequently, except for preaching Christ from obvious messianic prophecies, they mine the Old Testament mainly for theological truths, spiritual principles, and practical applications. Need a sermon on parenting? Deuteronomy 6 will do. Are you addressing leaders? The kings of Judah and Israel provide some leadership lessons. Is your church in a building project? Nehemiah is your go-to book. Want to preach on finances or communication? Consider Proverbs.

I don't mean to imply that the Old Testament is impractical for Christian living. On the contrary, the Old Testament is inspired by God to equip us for every good work in Christ (2 Tim. 3:15–17). But too many preachers make little or no effort to understand the connection of the text to the person and work of Jesus. The text serves a utilitarian purpose rather than a Christological one.

Simply put, these Old Testament sermons need to get saved.

I got the idea of a sermon getting saved from Graeme Goldsworthy's *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*. Let me share two key quotes, and you'll understand what I mean by a sermon getting "saved." In the first

quote, Goldsworthy asks us to make the connection between the Bible-as-true and Jesus-as-Lord:

If the biblical story is true, Christ is the only Saviour for humankind and there is room for no other way to God. If the story is true, Jesus Christ is the interpretative key to every fact in the universe and, of course, the Bible is one such fact. He is thus the hermeneutic principle that applies first to the Bible as the ground for understanding, and also to the whole of reality. . . . the person and work of Jesus Christ are foundational for evangelical hermeneutics.¹

Goldsworthy's if/then reasoning is illuminating. *If* the story of the Bible is true, *then* Jesus is the only Savior and the key to interpreting everything in the universe, including the Bible. In other words, you can't interpret the Scriptures correctly (or any part of reality correctly) unless you interpret them in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ. That's what I mean by an Old Testament sermon getting saved. No matter how many true things are said about the text, a sermon is lost until the Lord Jesus Christ stands in the middle of it.

To put it more practically, you should interpret every Old Testament text the same way you interpret everything else in the world. As a Christian, you already ask yourself (I hope) how the truth of Jesus Christ bears on every situation in your life. That's the right question. You know by faith, as Goldsworthy says, that "Jesus Christ is the interpretative key to every fact in the universe." So, when preaching from the Old Testament, keep asking that Christocentric question. You must bring Jesus to bear upon the text.

A second quote from Goldsworthy drives home the point: "If Christ truly is our Lord and Saviour, then he is the Lord and Saviour of our hermeneutics."² The Lord and Savior of our hermeneutics— isn't that a helpful thought? Homiletical salvation comes through

hermeneutical salvation. Once you grasp the Lordship of Christ in relation to the meaning of your preaching text, your sermon can be saved.

THE EXEGETICAL CASE

Of course that *sounds* right. Who would argue with doing everything under the Lordship of Christ? The question is whether the Bible actually leads us to interpret itself in such a Jesus-focused way.

The answer comes by noticing what Jesus says about the Old Testament, and by observing how His apostles handled the Old Testament. When you see their interpretive convictions, you will be compelled to follow them in viewing every Old Testament text through the lens of the gospel. Here's what we learn from Jesus and the apostles.

First, every part of the Old Testament—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—points to Jesus. Many of these pointers to Jesus are obvious: promises that lead to Jesus, prophecies that speak of Jesus, patterns that foreshadow the work of Jesus. Every part of the Old Testament contains some of these obvious pointers.

The Gospel of Luke records two of Jesus' most familiar statements about Old Testament interpretation. The first statement occurs during Jesus' encounter with two men on the road to Emmaus. A pair of disciples plods along, discussing the sad events surrounding Jesus' crucifixion and the bewildering report of an empty tomb. In the middle of their conversation, a stranger draws close. The stranger, of course, is Jesus, but His identity is hidden from them. Upon hearing their disappointment and confusion, Jesus rebukes them for their hesitancy to believe the prophets.

Luke records Jesus' words: "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?" (24:25–26). Luke then adds this key sentence: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the

things concerning himself” (v. 27). *Moses and the prophets. All the Scriptures.* On the Emmaus road, Jesus used the whole Old Testament to explain Himself to the disciples. Hold that thought while we add another one to it.

The second relevant statement occurs later that night among a larger group of disciples. Luke includes more detail on this occasion, but we can see the similarity between these words and Jesus’ words on the Emmaus road:

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 and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:44–47)

Jesus’ reference to “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” corresponds to the three major sections of the Hebrew Bible: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.³ Here Jesus is reiterating what He said earlier that day: the entire Old Testament speaks of Him.

Jesus’ two statements clarify what a Christ-centered hermeneutic for the Old Testament should entail—and it’s much more specific than we might have guessed. To preach Christ from the Old Testament is not to preach a *fuzzy* Christ, offering vague hints about His future work or speculating about His pre-incarnate presence in one story or another. Rather, we learn that the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings outline the contours of the Messiah’s earthly ministry. The disciples should have read these Scriptures in a way that prepared them for the cross, the empty tomb, for repentance and forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name, and for the inclusion of the nations in His salvation (vv. 26, 46–47; cf. “in accordance with the Scriptures” in 1 Cor.

15:3–4). That’s pretty specific! In short, to preach Christ from the Old Testament is to proclaim nothing less than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

To summarize, Luke 24 lays the foundation for interpreting all three parts of the Old Testament in light of Jesus. The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings point to the incarnate Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ministry to the nations. Jesus interprets the Scriptures this way, rebukes those who don’t, and illuminates His disciples so that they can.

As preachers, are we seeing what Jesus means for us to see?

This first exegetical point is easy to accept in reference to *obvious* messianic texts, such as the promise to Abraham, the typology of the Passover lamb, or the Suffering Servant prophecy. But what about when there’s no obvious pointer to Jesus in the text? Is it necessary to interpret less obvious texts in light of Christ?

Second, Old Testament texts that don’t contain explicit anticipation of Jesus are part of an Old Testament canon that by its very nature witnesses to Jesus. This point is vital for us to settle in our minds. In preaching Christ from the Old Testament, we should feel compelled to relate *every* text to Jesus, not just the texts that are obviously about Him.

John 5 is instructive in this regard. Jesus has been accused of making Himself equal with God, and so His opponents desire to kill Him (v. 18). In response, Jesus summons multiple witnesses to testify to His identity (cf. Deut. 19:15). The witnesses, according to John 5:30–47, include John the Baptist, Jesus’ own works, God the Father, the Scriptures, and Moses. For our purposes, the witness of the Scriptures is paramount.

Jesus calls on the Scriptures—what we call the Old Testament—to serve as a witness to His identity. He charges His opponents with failing to perceive the Christocentric witness of the Old Testament: “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” (John 5:39–40). The failure of Jesus’ opponents was not due to slackness. His opponents were in fact diligent students of the Old Testament. Yet for all their expertise and energy, they failed to grasp the very nature of Scripture as a witness to the incarnate Christ. God never intended the Old Testament by itself to give life. Rather, it was from the beginning a signpost pointing to Jesus Christ. Eternal life, Jesus says, is not found *in* the Scriptures but *through* the Scriptures as they bear witness about Him.

Jesus’ language here about the nature of the Scriptures suggests that He has in view more than obvious messianic texts.⁴ He seems to be saying that the Old Testament is pervasively Christ-centered, that its very fabric has been woven with Him in mind. Which means, like thread running through a piece of fabric, the entirety of the Scriptures relates to Jesus.⁵

Jesus’ assertion forces us to an inescapable conclusion: to understand the Old Testament in a way that marginalizes Jesus or neglects Him al-

To understand the Old Testament in a way that marginalizes Jesus or neglects Him altogether is to understand the Scriptures wrongly.

together is to understand the Scriptures wrongly. According to Jesus, failing to understand the Old Testament this way is not merely wrong but damning. The faulty hermeneutic of Jesus’ opponents has robbed them, Jesus says, of nothing less than salvation (John 5:34). They do not have eternal life (v. 40). Despite all their searching, despite all their educated and earnest Bible study, Jesus’ opponents

had totally missed the point of the Scriptures by failing to see how they witness to Him.

The failure to employ a Christ-centered hermeneutic to the Old

Testament is spiritually deadly. We either understand the Old Testament in a way that leads to Jesus and to eternal life in Him, or we misunderstand the Old Testament in a way that brings Jesus' rebuke down upon our own heads. God inspired the Scriptures to lead us and our hearers to Christ. As preachers, we must preach them that way.

Third, no Old Testament text can be rightly interpreted without understanding how it has been fulfilled in Jesus. Another relevant and well-known passage linking Christ and the Old Testament is found in the Gospel of Matthew. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17–20)

Several key observations must be made about this text. To begin with, Jesus is talking about the Old Testament. Jesus' references to the Law and the Prophets (v. 17), and then only to the Law (v. 18), are commonly understood to include the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures.⁶

Next, Jesus unambiguously affirms the abiding validity of the Old Testament. His ministry is not one of abolition (v. 17). All Scripture endures, even the tiniest strokes of the pen, until heaven and earth pass away (v. 18). Because attention to the commands of Scripture divides the least from the greatest in the kingdom (v. 19), no responsible Christian can set aside the Old Testament as irrelevant. And yet, we must not read the Old Testament as if Jesus hasn't come, as if the Old Testament

were purely Jewish history and not a Christian book.

That leads to our final and most vital observation: Jesus drives an interpretive stake in the ground in asserting that all the Old Testament is fulfilled in Him. In other words, Jesus changes how we read the Old Testament. Not just *parts* of the Old Testament, but *all* of it is fulfilled in Him! Every dot and every iota of every passage—every jot and tittle, as the King James famously put it—is fulfilled in the life and teaching of the incarnate Christ.⁷ Jesus' fulfillment language here clearly goes beyond obvious messianic promises and prophecies and patterns. It includes everything!

It would be difficult to overstate the hermeneutical significance of this. Jesus is the goal of every detail in the Bible. Which means no Old Testament text can be rightly understood without grasping its fulfillment in Him. Every passage, without exception, requires an interpretation involving Jesus. New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg boils it down:

[Jesus'] claim has massive hermeneutical implications and challenges both classic Reformed and Dispensationalist perspectives. It is inadequate to say either that none of the Old Testament applies unless it is explicitly reaffirmed in the New or that all the Old Testament applies unless it is explicitly revoked in the New. Rather, all the Old Testament remains normative and relevant for Jesus' followers (2 Tim 3:16), but none of it can rightly be interpreted until one understands how it has been fulfilled in Christ. Every Old Testament text must be viewed in light of Jesus' person and ministry and the changes introduced by the new covenant he inaugurated.⁸

In Matthew 5:17–20, Jesus tells us the Old Testament Scriptures are here to stay. But they must be understood in light of His life and teaching. Here, Jesus not only validates but necessitates a Christocentric approach to every text of the Old Testament.

Fourth, having been taught by Jesus how to read the Bible, the apostles adopted a broad prophetic understanding of the Old Testament. To observe that Jesus' apostles preached Christ from the Old Testament requires about as much insight as a child picking out his mother in a roomful of women. The Old Testament was *the* text for apostolic witness to Christ. In a passage worth quoting at length, Walter Kaiser observes,

As early as the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16–36), the apostle Peter used the Old Testament to demonstrate that Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection had been clearly anticipated by the writers of the Old Testament. Peter appealed to the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28–31), to the psalmist (Ps. 16), and to King David's understanding (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 110) to make these same points prior to the appearance of any New Testament literature. A few days later, as Peter and John were going into the temple, he healed a lame man at the temple gate (Acts 3). This occasioned another sermon from Peter, in which he again made direct references to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, noting how they pointed "to what [God] had foretold through all the prophets" (Acts 3:18), namely, that Christ must suffer. . . . This pattern of appealing to the Old Testament to demonstrate that Christ is the Messiah was repeated in Stephen's speech in Acts 7 and in Paul's speech in the synagogue at Antioch (Acts 13). . . . The apostles' appeal was directly and solely to the earlier and prior text of the Old Testament itself.⁹

Many other examples could be added to Kaiser's survey, such as Paul using the Scriptures to explain and prove that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 17:1–3); or the Bereans examining the Scriptures daily to verify the truthfulness of the apostolic witness to Jesus (17:11); or Apollos "showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus" (18:28). Indeed, Paul would later provide a succinct description of apostolic preaching:

“Him we proclaim” (Col. 1:28). The apostles proclaimed Christ, and the text they used to do so was the Old Testament.

Some rabbinic calculations tally 456 Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah or messianic times (this is likely an overestimation).¹⁰ The apostles employed many of these prophetic texts in their proclamation of Jesus as the Christ. Modern Christian interpreters readily embrace such an approach to preaching Christ from the Old Testament. And so we’re in good company when we recognize the prophetic testimony of the Scriptures to Christ (Matt. 26:56; Rom. 1:1–3; 16:25–26; 2 Cor. 1:20; 1 Peter 1:10–12).

What is somewhat startling, however, is the broadness of the prophetic lens through which the apostles read the Old Testament. Matthew provides the classic example in his interpretation of Jesus’ flight to Egypt while in the care of Joseph and Mary (Matt. 2:13–15). Matthew says that the flight and subsequent return was in fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecy: “Out of Egypt I called my son” (v. 15). But when we read Hosea’s own words, it’s not at all apparent that Hosea is prophesying. Hosea 11:1 appears simply to be a historical reference to the Exodus: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

We ought not be so uncharitable as to suggest that Matthew has misunderstood or misused the Old Testament. There’s sound justification for using a prophetic lens that’s wide enough to see in Israel the shape of Christ. I will offer justification for this in the next chapter, but for now don’t miss the basic point: the fulfillment of the Old Testament isn’t limited to predictive messianic prophecies. Rather, in some legitimate sense, the entire Old Testament embodies messianic promise. The whole text leans forward toward Christ.

Once we grasp this truth, Matthew’s link between Israel and Jesus—between Hosea’s “prophecy” and its “fulfillment” in Jesus’ return from Egypt—becomes less fantastical and more intelligible. Of course, one is left wondering how this broader understanding of prophetic fulfillment can be accurately explained, but the fact remains that

Christ can be proclaimed from Old Testament texts in a manner that pushes the boundaries of our own prophetic understanding. Matthew wasn't mistaken.

Fifth, the apostles encouraged reading the entire Old Testament as Christian Scripture. The previous observation is an example of how Matthew read the Old Testament with a broad prophetic understanding of fulfillment in Christ. The present observation is that Paul intends for us to read the Old Testament in the same way.

My experience with a well-known passage about the Old Testament, 2 Timothy 3:15–17, is that people speed through the first part on the way to the last part. But notice carefully the entirety of what Paul tells Timothy. The “sacred writings,” he says—what we call the Old Testament:

Are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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. 3:15–17)

All these verses go together. In fact, the redemptive focus of the first sentence *controls* the comprehensive scope of the second sentence. To be just a tad provocative, Paul isn't saying that all Scripture is profitable for making us competent *Jews*. He's saying that all Scripture is profitable for making us competent *Christians*. And we don't have to infer that this is what Paul means—he states it plainly. The sacred writings, he says, are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul's point couldn't be clearer, and the implication of his point must not be missed. The book that we call the Old Testament isn't merely Jewish Scripture. It's Christian Scripture. Every Old Testament text is profitable because it serves in some way to make God's people wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. That is, it teaches,

reproves, corrects, and trains us in righteousness *as Christians*; it completes us *as Christians*; it equips us for every good work *as Christians*. Paul is commending the Old Testament to us as Christian Scripture. The preacher, therefore, in order to preach the Scriptures accurately, must grapple with how every Old Testament text relates to Jesus.

A STRONG CORD

If we weave together each strand of this exegetical argument, then preaching Jesus Christ from every passage in the Old Testament becomes a cord not easily broken. The entire Old Testament—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—contains promises or prophecies or patterns about Christ. Furthermore, the texts that don't contain obvious promises and prophecies and patterns are still part of an Old Testament canon that by its very nature witnesses to Christ. Therefore, as Jesus Himself teaches, no Old Testament text can be interpreted rightly without understanding how it has been fulfilled in Him. The apostles, having learned from Jesus how to read the Scriptures like this, adopted a broad prophetic understanding of the Old Testament and encouraged the saints to read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture.

I hope you feel the force of this argument. You don't have to rely exclusively on the New Testament to preach about Jesus and the gospel and salvation and discipleship. The whole Bible is at your disposal. So start exalting Christ and teaching people how to walk with Him—*in every passage you preach*. You need only to understand how to do it.

But before we get to the How, we must add to the Why. There's more to be said about the necessity of your Old Testament sermon getting saved.

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