

TIPS FOR PREACHING THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Pastors and teachers, with Paul, I “charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word” (2 Tim 4:1–2). And when you do, don’t forget the Old Testament, the very “sacred writings” and “Scripture” Paul had in mind when he wrote 2 Tim 3:15–17 and the very “word” he commanded Timothy to preach. The pages of the Old Testament make up just over three-fourths of our Bibles. The same God of both righteous anger and blood-bought mercy appears in both the Old and the New Testaments. The Old Testament creates the problem and includes the promises that the New Testament answers and fulfills.

If we are convinced that the Jesus’s only Bible is still important for Christians (see <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/old-testament-important/>), how should we think about the intimidating task of preaching from the Old Testament? Here are seven tips for aspiring Old Testament preachers:

1. Approach the Old Testament as *Christian* Scripture that God wrote to instruct us.

What we call the Old Testament was the only Scripture Jesus had, and the apostles stressed that the ancient prophets wrote God’s Word for instructing Christians. Why did Moses record events like God’s guiding and protecting Israel through the wilderness and Red Sea? Paul 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). Regarding David’s psalms and all the other prophetic writings of his Bible, Paul also emphasized, “For whatever was written in former days was written *for our instruction*, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4; cf. v. 3). Similarly, Peter emphasized that “it was revealed to [the Old Testament prophets] that they were serving not themselves but you”—the Christian church (1 Pet 1:12). When Moses wrote Deuteronomy, he was writing for Christians (Deut 30:8). When Isaiah and Jeremiah wrote their prophecies, they were writing for Christians (Isa 29:18; 30:8; Jer 30:1–2, 25; 31:1, 33). When Daniel finalized his book, he knew that only those we now call Christians would fully grasp the import of all he was writing (Dan 12:5–10). The Old Testament is Christians Scripture that God wrote to instruct us. These “sacred writings ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,” and it is this “Scripture” that “is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:15–17). *Old* in Old Testament does not mean unimportant, and we as Christians should approach the text accordingly.

2. Interpret the Old Testament with the same care you would the New.

We must do this because it was Jesus’s only Bible, because in it we meet the same God (Heb 1:1), and because Jesus said that it was about him and his mission that he is now carrying out through his church (Luke 24:45–47; cf. 24:26–27, 44; John 5:39, 46; Acts 3:18, 25; 26:22–23). Theologically, to give the same care to the Old Testament as to the New means that we treat

the initial three-fourths of the Christian Scripture as the very Word of God for us (Mark 7:13; 12:36), which Jesus considered authoritative (Matt 4:3–4, 7, 10; 23:1–3), believed could not be broken (John 10:35), and called people to know and trust so as to guard against doctrinal error and hell (Mark 12:24; Luke 16:28–31; 24:25; John 5:46–47). Methodologically, caring for the Old Testament as we do the New means that with every passage we must consider genre, literary boundaries, grammar, translation, structure, argument flow, key words and concepts, historical and literary context, and biblical, systematic, and practical theology. God chose to disclose himself and his will by words in literature, so we must engage in God-dependent wrestling of each passage within its given book and place in redemptive history, and also in relationship to Christ.

So many Christian preachers will give years to Romans and only twelve weeks to the Minor Prophets. They take great care in assessing the message and lasting relevance of Mark's Gospel but only dabble in Genesis, Psalms, or Isaiah, while rarely even touching the other books. When others make account of your ministry, may such realities not be said of you. We must seek to faithfully proclaim "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) as disclosed from Genesis to Revelation and to do so in a way that God's approves because you rightly handle "the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

3. **Treat properly the *testamental* nature of the Old Testament.**

The early church fathers designated the two parts of the Christian Bible the Old and New Testament because they rightly saw that each addressed principally the old and new covenants, respectively. We call Jesus's Bible a *testament* because of its covenantal quality, which links it to a specific era in redemptive history—an era before Christ. The Old Testament substantially addresses how God establishes and enforces his old Mosaic covenant. And unlike the New Testament that was written in the common language of Greek and initially targeted at a multi-national church, the Old Testament was written to Hebrews in Hebrew, and it contains peoples, places, and powers from a different period in redemptive history.

The Old Testament bears a historical particularity that requires Christian preachers to observe carefully, understand rightly, and evaluate fairly what is there before building a bridge to Christian application and the church. For Christian preachers to engage the Old Testament as a *testament* requires that they identify the distinctive covenantal elements in the text and then consider how the coming of Christ influences the instructive nature of every passage.

4. **Remember that the Old Testament is *old*.**

The Old Testament addresses an era before Christ and details a covenant of which Christians are not a part and that has been superseded by the new. This fact requires that Christians carefully consider how Christ fulfills every Old Testament story, promise, and law before establishing their lasting relevance. The Old Testament ends demanding a sequel, demanding resolve. Jesus's Bible creates problems that he alone solves. The Old Testament provides foundation for all that Jesus and the New Testament build. We no longer live *directly* under the old covenant (Luke 16:16; Gal 3:24–26), for "in speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete" (Heb 8:13; cf. v. 6). While Moses's instructions still have lasting value for Christians, they do so only in light of the way Jesus fulfills the law and through his mediation

(Deut 30:8; Matt 5:17–19; 1 Cor 9:20–21). Similarly, while *every* promise is “Yes” for Christians, it is so *only in Christ* (2 Cor 1:20).

We ought not preach the Old Testament to Christians without mediating it through the lens of Jesus, whose blood-bought grace allowed God to even justly give his Word to sinners. Jesus’s person and work realize what the Old Testament anticipates (Matt 5:17–18; Luke 24:44; Acts 3:18), and Christ is the substance of all Old Testament shadows (Col 2:16–17). Every promise is Yes in Christ (2 Cor 1:20), and he embodies every ethical ideal the both law and wisdom call for (Rom 5:18–19). We need to read the Old Testament recognizing that one of its fundamental purposes is to help us celebrate more the Christ and all God would accomplish through the new covenant.

5. Read the Old Testament through the light and lens of Christ.

By “light” I mean that a proper reading of the Old Testament is only possible for the regenerate—those who have seen “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor 3:4). By “lens” I am stressing how Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection revealed truths in the Old Testament itself that were always there but not yet clear. We must recognize significant continuities between the Testaments, such that many prophets, kings, and righteous people saw Christ from a distance and longed for him (e.g., Matt 13:17; Luke 10:24; John 8:56; cf. Heb 11:13). Thus, Peter could tell us that “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” (1 Pet 1:10–12). On the other hand, there were significant discontinuities, in that the rebel population was not given eyes to see and ears to hear the Old Testament message (Deut 29:4[3]; Isa 6:9–10; 44:18; 29:10–11), and God did not fully disclose all of his meaning to the remnant until Christ came and revealed the mystery of the kingdom (Jer 30:24; Dan 12:8–10; cf. Mark 4:11–12).

The New Testament authors identify how, once seeing the risen Christ, they never read their Bible’s the same way again (cf. John 2:20–22; 12:13–16). They also highlight how the coming of Christ discloses the “mystery” of the Old Testament (Rom 16:25–26) and removes the “veil” that allows us to read the full meaning of what is actually there in the Old Testament itself (2 Cor 3:14).

The New Testament provides both the answer key and the algorithm for reading the Old Testament in its fulness. In many ways the Old Testament sets a pattern of 2 ... 4, but it is the New Testament that clarifies whether the next digit is 6 or 8 and therefore identifies whether we are to see the relationship of 2 and 4 as addition or multiplication. We must read the Old Testament through the light and lens of Christ.

6. Consider how to faithfully see and celebrate Christ in the Old Testament.

Here we must employ the discipline of biblical theology, which seeks to analyze and synthesize how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ. We can see and celebrate Christ in numerous ways, depending on the Old Testament text.

- a. *We can identify how Christ fulfills direct messianic predictions.* YHWH promises in Ezekiel 34:23, “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 Jesus directly claims to fulfill this prediction in John 10:11 and 10:16.

- b. *We can consider how Christ stands as the goal and climax of the redemptive story and all salvation-historical trajectories.* Five major covenants (Adamic-Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new) guide the plotline of Scripture, and they all find their terminus in Christ.
- c. *We can recognize how Christ’s coming creates numerous similarities and contrasts between the old and new ages, creations, and covenants.* For example, both covenants show a pattern of gracious redemption giving rise to gracious law-giving. As for contrasts, whereas access to YHWH’s presence in the temple was restricted to the high priest on the Day of Atonement, Christ’s priestly work opens the way for all in him to enjoy God’s presence (Heb 9:24–26; 10:19–22).
- d. *We can determine how Old Testament characters (e.g., Adam, Melchizedek, Moses, David), events (e.g., the flood, the exodus, the return to the land), and institutions or objects (e.g., the Passover lamb, the temple, the priesthood) clarify and anticipate Christ’s person and work.*
- e. *We can reflect on how who Yahweh is and what he does reveals the identity and activity of the divine Son.* When we hear Yahweh speaking in the OT and when we see Yahweh acting in the OT, we are seeing the very one who would embody himself in the person of Jesus.
- f. *We can contemplate how Christ embodies every ethical ideal from law or wisdom and how his righteousness is then imputed to all in him by faith.*
- g. *We can use the OT to instruct or guide others through Christ’s mediation—both through the pardon he supplies, which secures both promises and power, and the pattern of instruction and godliness that he sets.*

7. When preaching from the *New Testament*, take the time to consider how the authors are using their Bibles, whether through Old Testament allusion or citation.

The early church devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42), and the whole church is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, with Jesus as the cornerstone (Eph 2:20). What we must recognize is that the apostles themselves were preaching with their Bible’s open—our Old Testament, and they were making much of Christ from it. “From morning till evening [Paul] expounded to [those in Rome], 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). The New Testament is loaded with citations, allusions, and echoes of the Old Testament, and we need to help our people see them and note their significance.

When Paul asserted to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2), he did so as an Old Testament preacher. And when he claimed that all Scripture ... is profitable” (2 Tim 3:16) and commanded Timothy to “preach the word” (4:2), the “Scripture” and “word” he principally had in mind was the Old Testament. You will help yourself and your people to cherish the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) and to read the whole Bible as Christian Scripture when you take the time to wrestle with how the New Testament uses the Old.

So how can Christian preachers faithfully approach the Old Testament? Through the light and lens of Christ, preachers can proclaim the same God and the same good news in both Testaments, rejoicing in both the continuities and discontinuities of God's perfect plan progressing through the storyline of Scripture. The Old Testament was written for us, so let's feed our people like we believe that!

To assist you in helping your people interpret the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, see DeRouchie's "3 Books for Staying 'Hitched' to the Old Testament":

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/books-hitched-old-testament/>.

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