

Developing Redemptive Messages

In the previous lesson, we mainly talked about the rationale or the reasons for doing redemptive messages. In most of this lesson we will talk about how to do them. By way of review, however, we talked in the previous lesson about the necessity of a redemptive focus in all truly Christian preaching. Remember the rule of thumb from Jay Adams, who said, “If it is acceptable in a synagogue or a mosque, then there is something wrong with it.” Expository preaching is committed to revealing what the Word says. Jesus said the whole Word presents His person and work by revealing the grace that becomes most fully revealed in Him. To say what the text says is to reflect what it communicates concerning the ministry of our Savior.

Second, we also talked about some identification marks of non-redemptive preaching. We talked about some wrong paths that we could go down. We saw how easy they are to take. Wrong paths include any “sola bootstrapsa” messages that only say to fix it yourself. These are sometimes identified by the “deadly be’s”: be like, be good, or be disciplined. Let me remind you, these are not wrong messages in themselves, but they are wrong messages by themselves. If they are “sola bootstrapsa,” or if they are all we have said, then they are wrong. Rushdoony, in one of his early books before His theonomic work became strong, while writing on the Messianic character in American education, has an appendix entitled “The Menace of the Sunday School.” What he was talking about was the Sunday school teacher who says with wonderful sweetness, “Now Sally, if you are just a good little girl, Jesus will love you.” It sounds so sweet, but it is so foreign to the Gospel. Jesus loved us when we were His enemies. It is not because of our goodness that He is our Savior.

Such messages, all of the “deadly be’s,” inadvertently imply acceptance with God depends on our conduct. Yet this is contrary to the Scriptures. Isaiah 64:6 says, “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” In Luke 17:10 Jesus said that when we have done all we were commanded, we are still unworthy servants. If the message is only, “You do more good works, you be more disciplined,” the Bible is saying that is never enough. Even when you have done all that you were supposed to do, you are still an unworthy servant. So if the message’s entire scope is “do more or do better,” then that is actually not what Christ said can help us at all.

The Gospel is foreign to the way most people think. Most people, even in the church, are accustomed to balancing scales. They say, “I am not perfect, but the good work is going to outweigh the bad.” According to Scripture, however, our good works actually weigh against us on the bad side of the scales. They are still filthy rags. They are still that which is tainted with our humanity. The Westminster Confession of Faith says in chapter 16, “Our best works cannot merit pardon for sin but are actually reprobable by God. That is a new concept to many people who think their good works are going to outweigh their bad. What is actually happening, however, is that their good works are weighing against them. Their good works are subject to God’s reproof.

That is why the message, “Be good,” actually hurts people, because we are actually telling people to do more of that which would weigh against them, unless, as the Confession continues, “Nonetheless, God is pleased to receive them [that is, good works] in Christ.” I am a visual thinker, so I like this notion that my works are wrapped in Christ. It is Christ’s righteousness that makes the good works acceptable. If the message does not inform people how His grace, His working, is what makes them acceptable to God, then it is actually the wrong message.

When I was a child, I went through a rite of passage in my adolescence that every male in the household had to experience. This rite of passage was known as using a two-man crosscut saw. When you grew up in the rural southern United States, my daddy and his daddy before him had all learned how to use a two-man crosscut saw. We had chainsaws as well, but this was a rite of passage. I can remember one particular crisp fall morning we were sawing through some logs. One log we were sawing on the cutting frame was rotten on the inside. We got only a little way into the log and it split. It fell off the cutting frame and landed so hard that it sheered along one face. To my adolescent brain, that rotten piece of log looked like a horse head. After we were finished sawing for the day, I took that rotten horse head log home. A few weeks later, I took that rotten horse head log and I nailed a two-by-four to it. I put some sticks on it for legs, and I tied on a rope for a tail. I put some nails along the side of the two-by-four. Then I wrapped it in some paper, put a ribbon on it, and gave it to my dad. He took the paper off of it and looked at it and said, "That is wonderful! What is it?" I said, "Dad, it is a tie rack. You can hang your ties on the nails along the side of it." For years after that my father used that rotten horse head log as his tie rack. He leaned it against the closet wall because it would not stand up straight.

When I first presented that work to my father, I thought it was really good. I thought it was a work of art ready for a museum. When I was only a little older, I wished by dad would get rid of it. He accepted it not because it was good but because he was good. It was because of what was in him that made it acceptable, not the gift itself. That is what we have to say when we preach to God's people. He accepts these works, but they are acceptable only as they are received in Christ. It is what God has provided that makes them acceptable, not the things themselves. When we preach, we are always trying to wrap the imperatives in the indicatives of the grace of God. We remind people that it is what He has done, what He provides, that makes these things acceptable to Him and then makes it a joy to present them to Him. We recognize His grace is what makes them acceptable.

That is not always an easy step. Martin Luther preached a sermon at the end of his life called "The Sum of the Christian Life." He acknowledged some of the struggle of explaining grace. He said, "It is exceedingly difficult to get into another habit of thinking in which we clearly separate faith and works of love. Even though we are in faith, the heart is always ready to boast of itself before God and say, 'After all, I have preached so long and lived so well and done so much. Surely He will take this into account.' But it cannot be done. With men you may boast, but when you come before God, leave all that boasting at home and remember to appeal from justice to grace." Do not ask God to be just. Do not ask God to be fair. You do not want fair. You want mercy. You want grace. Luther continued, "But let anyone try this, and he will see and experience how exceedingly hard and bitter it is for a man who all his life has been mired in his work righteousness to pull himself out of it and with all his heart rise up through faith in the one Mediator. I myself have been preaching and cultivating grace for almost 20 years, and still I feel the old clinging dirt of wanting to deal so with God that I may contribute something so He will have to give me His grace in exchange for my holiness. Still I cannot get it into my head that I should surrender myself to sheer grace. Yet I know that this is what I should and must do." That is an amazingly candid statement. I want to contribute something. "Lord, let it count for something for my merit." Yet you must get it into your head that it is entirely His goodness. It is nothing in you. Depend on His grace. If we are teaching people that Gospel, then it becomes imperative for our preaching as well that they understand that role.

If we talk about the distinctives of what Christ-centered preaching is, if we must bring grace into every message, then we should also say what Christ-centered preaching is not. I am indebted to Sidney Greidanus in his book, *Sola Scriptura*, for some quick definitions of what Christ-centered preaching is not. First, Christ-centered preaching is not allegorical preaching. Christ-centered preaching does not attempt to make the person of Christ appear in every Old Testament mud puddle and camel track by

allegory or analogy or by paralleling Old Testament accounts and New Testament experiences of Jesus. Remember in the previous lesson we talked about this in relation to Rahab's cloth. Was Rahab's cloth about the blood of Christ or about the fact that she was a scarlet woman? You can make it mean anything you want it to mean if you are going by allegory. Christ-centered preaching is also not what Greidanus called "leap-frogging to Golgotha." That is when something in the Old Testament reminds you of something in the life of Christ. Greidanus said, "Christ-centered preaching shows how God's grace operates throughout history to enable God's people to understand and depend upon His provision alone for their salvation." That is a good summary. The question to ask is how God's grace is operative so God's people are dependent on Him rather than themselves.

Second, Greidanus said that Christ-centered preaching is not antinomian preaching. When you talk about grace-focused or Christ-centered preaching, the greatest fear in evangelical or Reformed circles is that you will become antinomian. Thus we must be clear that we are not talking about antinomian preaching. Christ-centered preaching does not negate the necessity of the Law in believers' lives. It teaches instead that our obedience has no power to redeem or grant merit before God. Christ-centered preaching reveals the grace in all of Scripture to motivate God's people according to Christ's precept: "If you love me, you will obey what I command." It is not wiping out the Law. It is giving the proper motivation for obedience. The obedience, furthermore, is not to gain merit but to walk in safety. It is to walk in glory. It is to do not only that which is best for us but also that which is most glorifying to the One we love. The grace focus has in its intent not to justify us but to inspire us to do what God requires.

After saying what redemptive preaching is not, we can talk about what redemptive preaching is. First, it is the recognition of all Scripture as one organic history of God's redeeming work that is the revelation of His grace. Remember that Vos gave us the progressive principle—there is a progression, the organic principle, which means it is all tied together, and the organic principle means it is all tied together in revealing what God is doing to redeem His people.

Second, redemptive preaching is the relation of all persons, events, and teaching to the revelation of grace as it is ultimately made known in Christ. Greidanus said,

In opposing the fragmentary interpretation, which reads the Bible as a collection of biographies, the redemptive-historical side stresses the hermeneutical significance of the unity of redemptive history. The unity of redemptive history implies the Christocentric nature of every historic text. Redemptive history is the history of Christ. He stands at its center, but no less at its beginning and end. Scripture discloses its historiography right at the beginning, in Genesis 3:15. Genesis 3:15 places all subsequent events in the light of the tremendous battle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, between Christ coming into the world and Satan, the ruler of this world. And it places all events in the light of the complete victory which the seed of the woman shall obtain. In view of this, it is imperative that not one single person be isolated from this history and set apart from this great battle. The place of both opponents and coworkers can only be determined Christologically.

Greidanus is saying that the theme verse of the Bible is not John 3:16 but rather Genesis 3:15. God spoke to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed. You will strike his heel, but he will crush your head." Now all events, all of human history that unfolds from that event, is unfolding that first Gospel, that explanation of what Christ would be. Everything is about that great battle that is engaged between the seed of the woman, Christ, and the serpent and all his

seed. That is everything—whether you are talking about the judges or the kings or our lives today. It is still the battle that is being engaged until Christ will hold full sway.

It is almost as though we have been given the privilege of standing on a hill overlooking a vast Napoleonic battle field. Some of you may have visited Waterloo. If you stand up on a hill, you can see where the armies engaged. You could pick out where the artillery, infantry, and cavalry all would be set up. You could imagine where the supply lines or spies would be. Yet you could not explain any particular without relating it to the battle. Everything has a role in a battle. The same is true with redemptive history. We stand on Genesis 3:15 and say, “There is Samson. There is Paul. There is David.” We begin to understand their roles in light of the great battle of the victory of the King. Everybody has a place. Everybody serves a purpose. The goal in redemptive-historical preaching is to ask, “What is the purpose? What is the place of something in the overall battle that is being engaged?”

Our goal is not to make every passage mention Christ but to show where every passage stands in relation to the grace ultimately revealed in Christ. That idea is important so that we do not become allegorical. You could look at every passage and ask, “Where is Jesus?” Or you could ask, “What is the function of this passage in revealing the nature of grace that is ultimately manifested fully in Christ’s work?” If we simply have the idea that we have to make every passage mention Jesus, then we will become very allegorical.

We are also not doing an imaginative leapfrogging to Golgotha. That happens when a preacher is in the Old Testament and mentions the women around the well of Jacob and says, “This passage reminds me of something in the life of Jesus.” What we are actually trying to do is identify wherever we are in history, whether with Adam and Eve, the Flood, the Patriarchs, or the Law, or the kingship, or even any aspect of the New Testament, such as Christ’s coming or resurrection, the church or His coming again. The question to ask is where we are in the battle to crush Satan. As we move historically along, our goal is to ask where we are engaged in the battle and what the function is of this person in the battle overall. The preacher explains the role of any epic, event, person, or passage within the divine crusade of redemption, which is the sovereign victory of the seed of the woman over Satan.

It is easy to give a description of that, but sometimes it is difficult to do. For that reason, we are going to talk about other approaches besides the redemptive-historical approach, so that we will value that one. Simon Blocker said in 1955, “Christian preaching is simply the proclamation of the divine crusade of redemption of God’s way out of the human predicament.” That is the same notion that I am teaching. To make it Christian preaching, we must present God’s way out. How is God the hero? What is He doing?

A basic process that we could follow for Christ-centered preaching has three steps. Start with asking what the fallen condition focus (FCF) is. What was wrong that the Holy Spirit wrote this? If we were Lutheran, we would be asking what the burden of the text is. What was wrong that this text needed to be written for that generation and succeeding generations? What was the fallen condition that requires God’s intervention and rescue? A true FCF requires a divine solution. It thus exposes the inadequacies of legalistic, moralistic messages. If your target is clear, that you are dealing with fallenness, then simple human activity is not going to fix it. By identifying the FCF, we are requiring God’s intervention. That is why we avoid man-centeredness as well as antinomianism. We are identifying the problem that God must answer, and we are showing how that is being addressed first by identifying the FCF.

Second, we ask what redemptive or grace principles are evident in the text. Having identified the burden, what is God doing about it? We try to examine historical context. This is important, because there are various ways we can identify the grace in the text. We can identify it from the historical

context, the genre, narrative features, doctrinal statements, divine actions, or even surrounding passages. All of those things underscore the necessity and presence of God's redemptive work, or grace, on behalf of His people. In essence, we are asking what the text tells us about the nature of God providing redemption. Or what does it tell us about the nature of man requiring redemption? You have heard those questions before. Those are the two lessons. What does this tell me about God? What does this tell me about me? By asking those two fair questions of any text, you are automatically going to start dealing redemptively. It can no longer be simply about human activity.

Remember that context is part of text. Be expository, not fanciful. Grace principles may be found before, after, or throughout the immediate text. You would have to say that some sections of the Pauline epistles contain nothing but imperatives. Yet those sections have context. Before he gave those imperatives, he said, "In view of God's mercy, present your bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual act of worship." Before he began to list all the acts of spiritual worship he said, "In view of God's mercy, do these things." He had spent 11 chapters explaining God's mercy before he began to list the things to do. If you only deal with a passage in isolation, then there may not be grace in evidence. Yet context is part of text. So it may be something said after, before, or woven through that is revealing the grace principles in play.

Third, in the light of how these grace principles fit into the overall plan of redemption, how should we respond to these principles in our lives? As we saw grace being taken to struggle back then, how is truth being taken to our struggle today? How are we to respond to it? This, in my mind, is the joy of redemptive preaching. Christ, whom you are preaching, is He who helps the preacher along as well as the people. Why do you think of doing ministry? You want to help people. You want to bring God's grace to peoples' lives. We are not saying, "You need to know more doctrine. You need to do additional behaviors." That is what most people are thinking as they approach the text. We are saying instead, "There is some struggle that you are going through. It is like the struggle of those people for whom this is written. The grace of God is telling you how to deal with that struggle." We take truth to struggle, and we become the physicians of souls that we want to be, rather than just those pestering our people to do more every week. On occasion, you may have to say, "Take these pills." Yet your goal is this healing. We give help to people that this grace-centered, Christ-centered approach helps with.

If you ask, "Where do we get the grace?" There are various interpretive approaches for Christ-centered preaching. The first two are the less authoritative kinds. The first is a topical approach. A topical approach, which will not be emphasized in this course, creatively adds redemptive truth to the topic at hand. It was said of Spurgeon that wherever he began in Scripture, he always took a shortcut to the cross. We are not going to talk about shortcutting, although I like the ethic, because Spurgeon knew he wanted to get to God's work before he ended. If you read much of Spurgeon's work, however, Christ often rode in on a white charger at the end of the sermon. There was often nothing in the text that provided the basis for what was being said.

Another way to get to the grace is a textual approach. A textual approach is including redemptive truth by analogy, illustration, or addition. I remember when I was a child that I went to a wonderful, large Baptist church that I sometimes attended. In an evening service, the pastor gave a wonderful message on not procrastinating. He said it is God's time, not your time. You should be a steward of time as well as treasures. Do not put off until tomorrow what you can do today. It is God's time, so you should be responsible. At the end, there was an altar call. Nothing in the message or the text had been pointed out that would lead you to Christ. I was still thankful for the notion that Christ is still the answer. If you are not being a good steward of time and not doing all that you should, then there is a reason for you to go to Christ. Yet it was a textual addition. It was nothing that had actually come out of the text.

Our goal is those messages that are expository in nature. The expository approach finds the actual redemptive focus of a passage, first in the text. There are some texts that will mention the work of Christ. If you are preaching from Matthew 26, which is the crucifixion, then you will be able to see redemptive truth. Just say what the text says. One way to expound grace principles is to say what the text says, if it is actually mentioning Christ or His redemptive work. It could be a Gospel account, a Messianic psalm, or an epistle reference. Peter said, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.” That is clearly a reference to Christ’s work on our behalf.

The problem is that if you are only going to preach redemptive truth where the text explicitly talks about the crucifixion or Christ’s redemptive work, how much of the Bible are you going to miss? I do not know the answer to my own question, but we could guess 90%. If you are waiting for a specific reference to Christ’s redemptive work, then you are either not going to preach Christ’s redemptive work very often or you are going to narrow quite severely what you are going to talk about. While a textual expository approach may get you to redemptive truth, it cannot be the only way.

A second way to redemptive truth may be by looking at type. Edmund Clowney has some discussion about typology. There is a flowering in the current discussion of the nature of Hebrew narrative, so there is much more discussion about typology today than a decade ago. This is where Christ’s redemptive work is represented in an Old Testament type. For Reformed people, the rule of thumb is that a type is only a type if the New Testament represents it as such. Some examples are the temple or the kingship of David. There are things that are identified as types. The Bible may say, “These things were done as an example for us.” That word, example, is from the Greek word *typos*. I tend to think that the way the narratives of the Old Testament are structured is sometimes indicated to be typological by the paralleling that happens in the New Testament narratives.

I can remember when I was a child laughing at a preacher who said, “Here is what happened when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac. They went up a hill. The son put wood on his back. Get it? Hear it?” I thought that was silly. Yet I am not sure I think it is silly anymore. If we were reading *Moby Dick* and in chapter three there was a description of Queequeg’s spear and then much later in chapter 52 there was another mention of another spear but it had the same description, I would say that the author was doing something intentional. We tend to think that one author was Luke and another author was Moses. That is true, but there is another author in play, who is the Holy Spirit. If it is the same canonical authorship, then there may be other things going on. What I have just said is highly controversial. I would not urge you to make that your first step in preaching. Yet when you read Clowney, you will have to think about typology.

If you are only going to preach redemptive truth where the text specifically mentions some aspect of Jesus’ redemptive work or there is some typological reference to it, now how much of the Bible will you skip? Again I do not know the answer to my own question. We might guess 80%. So how do we get to redemptive truth that is not represented in text or type?

The last way has to be context. We identify where this passage’s events, persons, or instruction fit in the overall revelation of God’s redemptive plan. Or we identify where this passage’s imperatives stand in relation to the grace principles evident in context. How does context reveal things to us? One way that passages reveal Christ to us is by predicting Him. These are things like prophecies or the proto-evangelium of Genesis 3:15. These are things that predict who Christ is or what He will do. All forms of prophetic material are predictive.

A second way that context reveals the work of Christ to us is that it may be preparatory. There are things that are preparing us for the work of Christ. They prepare us to understand Christ's person or His work or both. Sometimes they even do this negatively. How did the Law become our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ? Ultimately it did so by pointing out our inadequacy to keep the Law. Paul said, "Through the law I died to the law that I might live for Christ." It teaches me the negative about me as a way of preparing me for Christ. It is preparing me to understand another I must depend on, even what He would do. There were preparations for understanding the work of Christ in the sacrifice system of the Old Testament. The writer of Hebrews used that repeatedly. You will understand what Christ was doing because of the sacrifices of the Old Testament and the fact that we have a greater High Priest now.

Certain passages are reflective of the work of Christ. That means that we see Christ's character or nature being reflected in what He does for His people or what they do for one another.

Some passages are resultant of the work of Christ. That means that we see something that applies to us as a result of what Christ's redemptive work has accomplished. One example is the fact that you can pray. What is the reason you can pray? It is because you have someone interceding for you. Your ability to pray and be heard is a result of the redemptive work of Christ. Your ability to worship is a result of what Christ has done. Your ability to be treasured by God is a result of what Christ has done. There are many aspects of our lives that are described in various texts as being resultant of the work of Christ.

What I have been talking about is classic redemptive-historical method. The big picture includes Genesis 3:15 and forward. From Genesis to Revelation, everything reveals the battle between the seed of the woman and Satan. The various ways that things are being revealed are through things that are predictive of the work of Christ, preparatory, reflective, or resultant from the work of Christ. Somewhere in this large scheme of biblical history, we can determine how a particular passage functions.

I taught that for over 10 years before I listened to myself preach. I recognized that although I talked about fitting things in their large historical context, it was rarely what I actually did. I began to think, "I still think I am preaching grace. I still think I am preaching redemptively. Yet I am not always doing this Genesis to Revelation masterpiece of everything being thrown in." I began to recognize that there are other approaches to doing this redemptive preaching that are not this macro, all of world history approach. There are other options for preaching redemptively.

I do not want to negate in any way or even belittle these redemptive-historical methods. They are absolutely essential for navigating where you are in the text. Yet the macro approach is always redemptive-historical. That means finding the place or function of the text in redemptive history. There are many ways that this functions. Those of us who are Westerners think in a linear way. We think that this historical event led to that historical event and that historical event led to Christ. That is one way of thinking about it.

Another way of thinking about the macro scheme is to recognize that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, is particularly an Eastern-minded document. Eastern thinking does not often work linearly, but it often takes an idea and circumscribes it to make the point. It talks around to make the point. That is another way of thinking about the Bible.

You might ask how humanity is going to approach God. We messed up early in life. So we will have a law. If everyone obeys the Law of God, then they will be okay with God. Does that work? No. So we

will have a period of judges in which everyone will do what is right in his own eyes. How does that work? It does not work either. Let us then choose a human king. We will choose the best, brightest, biggest, and handsomest, and we will let that person make the decisions for us. When we have a human king who is the best of all people, then things will be okay for us. How well does that work? That does not work either. So we will get the prophets to come. The prophets will come and give us the Word of God that will correct us. We will have the correct understanding, and they will give us the correct kings that we should have. If we get enough prophets to help the people of God, then we will hang together and be the people of God and everything will be okay. How well does that work? It does not work. If none of that worked, we better make it up to God. We will have some kind of a temple system. We will sacrifice to God. We will give enough sacrifices that He will be happy with us. Does that work? No. We are going to have to have a better lawgiver. We are going to have to have a better judge. We are going to have to have a better king. We are going to have to have a better priest. We are going to have to have a better sacrifice. We need Christ.

We have had many dead ends. We had many things that did not work to point to the thing that did work, and that we must have. It is more than a linear history, even though it is still taking an encompassing view of history. It is showing that there are certain things that have been bridges. The sacrifice system gives us a bridge to understand what Christ would do. Yet there are other things that are dead ends, such as doing what is right in our own eyes. Trying to be good enough for God to keep the Law is a dead end. By these various forms of dead ends and bridges, history functions to show us what God is doing in Christ.

All of those ideas are various forms of the macro interpretation. Yet there are micro interpretations, too. I will guess that you will often feel more comfortable with those. For example, sometimes in an historical or narrative passage, there is doctrinal instruction. There is redemptive doctrine or an understanding of grace that is exemplified, stated, or taught. If you are reading an account of Abraham that says, "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness," is there any grace principle in that? You do not have to go from Genesis to Revelation. You can say, "It is right there!" It is a doctrinal statement that shows the grace of God. Its nature, how it functions, is by grace. Faith leads to God's blessing, not what we do. Sometimes, when looking at biblical narratives or other parts of Scripture, we can identify a micro way in which to find grace in the passage as well as with the broader scope.

The third approach to redemptive preaching, which is the one I use the most, is called relational interaction. That is identifying what redemptive truth or grace principle God demonstrates toward His people or in their dealings with each other. Is there any place in which God deals with an awful king and yet still provides him mercy? There is David. There is Manassas. We see God providing mercy toward people who do great evil. Is there any redemptive truth there? Is there any grace principle?

Sometimes it is merely looking at the narrative from the perspective of this side of the cross. Sometimes people think that in order to interpret the Old Testament properly we have to go blind to what Jesus did on the cross. Yet I live on this side of the cross. I know that what happened in the Old Testament was done to prepare people to understand what Christ would do. So as I look back and see those things from this side of the cross, I understand what truth was being prepared for them. Is there strength that God is providing in weakness? Is there faithfulness despite unfaithfulness? Is there provision for need? Is there forgiveness for sin? Is there protection in danger? Is there discipline for correction? I think this is what you will feel the most comfortable doing. I do not want to negate the redemptive-historical large scope. If what you are doing is recognizing that God is preparing His people, sometimes in very simple ways, for what He is going to reveal redemptively in Christ, then you can look at that text and ask, "How is

God showing His mercy?” That grace principle in evidence is going to appear to you quickly if you are putting on your lenses and asking, “What is this telling me about God? What is this telling me about me?” It is going to show you aspects of God’s grace in revelation.

The redemptive lenses to use in approaching all texts are the two key questions that are always applicable and always fair. What does this text reveal about God’s nature or attributes that provides the work of Christ or what does this text reveal about our nature or attributes that requires the work of Christ? Revealing aspects about the necessity or provision of grace, rather than mentioning Jesus, is what makes a sermon redemptive. Do not take that to mean I am telling you not to mention Jesus. I am concerned that we do not say, “This word means Jesus or this event means Jesus” in places that the text obviously does not mean that, which will lead us into allegorical errors. Rather, we want to say, “This text is revealing grace.” I can always say, “We know that this aspect of grace is more fully revealed in Christ.” It is not this text means Jesus, but I understand how it bears on or has relation to what ultimate grace is provided in Christ. I may still mention Jesus in the message, but I am not making the text mention Jesus where He really does not appear. I am showing how the grace of God is being exposed as a way of understanding the ultimate work of Christ.

This reminds us that the term “Christ centered” is synecdoche, which means “part for the whole.” There are other similar terms such as “grace focused,” “redemptive preaching,” or “gospel oriented.” People refer to it in different ways. The term “Christ centered” is synecdoche for all of God’s redeeming work that makes us know and depend on His grace ultimately provided in Christ. A Christ-centered sermon does not attempt to make Jesus appear where the text does not speak of Him. Rather it demonstrates the relation of the text to His person or His work or both.

Notice that it may not just be His person. Often biblical texts do not directly reveal the person of Jesus but reveal a dimension of God’s gracious nature that will be most fully revealed in Christ and must be grasped by us to know Him and to reflect Him. I think of what Paul said in Acts 20. He was explaining toward the end of his ministry what he did. He said, “I consider my life nothing if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” He considered what he had done nothing if he did not finish his task. His task was testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. He gave a great and gracious context to everything that he was about. Did Paul give imperatives in his letters? Of course he did. Did he give instruction or sometimes say disciplinary things? Yes, he did all of those things. Yet it was always in the context of helping people to understand the grace of God that is their ultimate hope.

In historical narratives, it is often more difficult to follow this theme. If you are in Ephesians, where you are learning “by grace you are saved, though faith,” it is easy to see grace there. It may be more difficult to see grace where David slays Goliath. Where is it there? How did David slay Goliath? He said, “You come with sword, javelin, and spear. I come in the name of the Lord.” Even in the narrative, David reminded himself and God’s enemies that his strength, his power, is not his own. It is what God provides. He comes with the authority, with the name, and with the purposes of his God. There is always a redemptive context.

Let us talk about how you will use these redemptive lenses to identify grace principles in narratives. One good way to start is by asking what this text reveals about God’s nature or attributes that provides the work of Christ. Or we can ask what is revealed about our nature or attributes that requires the work of Christ. Using those questions, which are often the relational interaction questions, you can identify the grace principles or patterns evident in the text. I will speak more about patterns later. The key idea is that God is the hero of the text. If you maintain that idea, then you are on safe ground. How am I

showing how God rescues? How is God the hero in this account? We are unfolding the story of His rescue. Tim Keller has written that one of the reasons that Christ-centered preaching so appeals to a postmodern mind is that this is a generation that so loves narrative. When you are doing redemptive preaching, God always comes to the rescue. There is always that implicit story going on. How is God rescuing His people? He is always the hero if we understand how the text is functioning.

Here are some grace principles or patterns that you might look for in historical narratives. First is deliverance before obedience. When does the exodus happen in relation to the giving of the Law? It is before. Even when God gives the Law, before He says what to do, He says, “I am the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, therefore do these things.” He does not say, “Do these things, and then I will rescue you.” The pattern was that deliverance came before obedience.

Second is that a covenant is made before a condition is met. God obligates Himself before the conditions are met by the one who is obligated humanly. Love is before and beyond performance. Before the performance is love. Beyond the failure to perform adequately, there is still love from God. These are patterns.

If you are looking for principles of grace, there are things like seeing mercy for the guilty. There is strength for the weak. There is love for the unloved. There is provision for the needy. There is rescue for the helpless. There is justice for the oppressed. There is punishment for enemies. There is discipline, redeeming discipline, for the wayward. There is warning for the negligent. There is faithfulness for the unfaithful. What is God doing that is gracious? Or what are those who represent Him doing that is gracious? He gives something undeserved. He provides something that could not be provided by human strength alone. How is grace in evidence?

Having done that, we motivate obedience required by this text with its grace principles. Remember that we said application answers four questions: what to do, where to do it, why to do it, and how to do it. The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons course and the Elementary Practicum course prepare you for what to do and where to do it. You learn instructional specificity. That means you learn how to determine what the text told you to do and where it told you to do it. Now in Christ-Centered Preaching, we are asking how Christ’s grace motivates and provides strength. In the following lesson we will focus on the how. In this lesson we are focusing on the why. How is my love for Him being generated by the grace that is in the text so that I will long to do those things that please God? For those who think that Christ-centered preaching is antinomian, they do not understand the process. We have never excluded these application questions. What makes it Christ centered is asking why we do what we do. That has to be not for merit, not out of personal gain, but out of love for Him. The grace principles that are being excavated are the attempts to make God’s people understand their love for Him.

As we look at the narratives to examine with redemptive lenses, we are looking first for relational interaction. Second we are looking for a doctrinal statement. Third we are looking for redemptive-historical methods. All of those are now our tools for excavating the grace that is in the passage. Look for those grace patterns or principles. Remember that texts may function as dead ends or bridges. As you look at the narrative, you are asking, “What grace principles are evident?” They may be on the macro scale. They may be in doctrinal statements. They may be in the way people relate to one another or the way God is relating to them. What grace principles are in evidence?

As you go about organizing a narrative for a sermon, it is a different from what we have done for the epistles. The epistles are often just a paragraph, but the narratives are sometimes three or more chapters

long. If you are in 1 Samuel, there may be large sections of material that are preached at once. How do you organize narratives?

First, remember that exploding a verse or distilling a passage are both legitimate homiletical movements that may affect how an outline is formed. Often when we are in didactic or epistle material, we are working with a small piece of material and exploding the implications. In narratives, we are often going another direction. We are working with large chunks of material and pulling it together. What are the principles that we see in operation in this narrative? Christ, in the Lord's Prayer, for instance, explodes the implications of Proverbs 30:8-8. Yet in Matthew 12:38-41 He summarizes four chapters of Jonah in only four verses. We see both patterns going on, sometimes exploding and sometimes distilling.

Second, there is a key thought you should have as you prepare messages from narrative passages. Principalize—that is a made-up word—main points and subpoints. That means to identify the truth principles that are supported by the text features and facts. Do not state text facts as main points or subpoints that will leave you with no truth to illustrate or apply.

What does all of that mean? It is tempting when you are explaining a narrative simply to retell the facts of the narrative. You might say, "First David took out his sling. Second David threw a rock at Goliath. For my third main point, Goliath hit the ground." That is all true, and what you have done is tell the story in chronological order. Then you try to do application. You say, "What should you do? David took out a sling. You should take out your slings, whatever they are in life. You should take them out and slay your giants." You are trying to make application, but you cannot work with that point. You should be looking for the principle that a main point is supplying that is proven by the facts of the text. For instance, "God's servants trust Him even when they face adversity. How do I know that? When David went against Goliath, he called out in the name of God." The facts support the principle.

Here are some examples of what you should not do. These are restatements of text facts that merely describe the text. Israel confronted Jericho. Israel marched around Jericho. The walls of Jericho came tumbling down. That is just relaying the text in chronological order. Here is the way you can form biblical principles from the text. In the old homiletics language, these are called universal truths. What universal truth is proven by that text fact? Faithfulness requires facing God's enemies. Israel had to go against Jericho. They did ultimately confront Jericho. Faithfulness requires obeying God's Word. God said, "March around," and they marched around. Faithfulness results in seeing God's hand. The walls of Jericho tumbled down.

The way in this institution that we teach that sermons are often formed is with the double helix image. Explanation is followed by illustration is followed by application. What you are often doing in a narrative is reversing that pattern. First, you establish a principle such as "faithfulness requires facing God's enemies." That is the principle, which is the main point. Then you will tell some of the narrative. "Jericho was a major town, and it was where the enemies of God would have kept watch over anything that entered the land of Canaan. Therefore it was necessary that it be confronted. God's people were told to do it and they did, at least this generation did it, but not the generation before. How difficult it was." After I give the principle, I am giving the facts and retelling the story that supports that principle. That is going to lead to another principle, such as "faithfulness requires obeying God's Word." These principles themselves may have subpoints that are also principles. Subprinciples are not just text facts, but the text facts are always going to support the principle.

If you are creating an outline, it will not look any different. You are still going to have main points, but I want to make sure that your main points are not simply text facts. If they are, then when you get to the

application you will be lost. When you talk about a principle, however, such as “faithfulness requires facing God’s enemies,” you then have a principle that you can apply.

One question about narrative preaching is whether you need to use illustrations. The answer is yes, although at times the narrative, if it is told with lived-body detail, may be the illustration. There does not always have to be an external illustration. The illustration may be an aspect of the narrative itself, retold. Remember that it is not just an allusion to the narrative, but rather it is a retelling of the story in a way that it can be engaged. Sometimes the illustration will have a larger component in a narrative sermon as you are explaining the narrative and telling it. We will talk more about this in another lesson.

We use the text facts to support the main and subpoint principles. In didactic passages, the epistles, the raw material that was available to support the main points and subpoints were stated truths, propositional development, and thought flow by which we exegeted the paragraph. Our resources were in the thought of the paragraph. In narratives, however, the raw material available to support the truth or truth claims or applications may be in stated truths or they may be in exhibited truths. What do we see happening between God and His people? What happened to David after that? What is being exhibited that will prove the truth that you just said? It may be in dialogue, character development, context, the cultural setting, the flow of the plot, or the story patterns. Those of you who have studied Hebrew know that many story patterns recur in the way Hebrew narratives are written. With epistles, we are exegeting thought. In a narrative, we are exegeting actions. What do these actions prove regarding a principle so that we can say this principle can be proven out of this narrative?

I know that the narratives may be intimidating to you because it is much easier to exegete thought. When I was seven or eight years out of seminary, I went to visit a friend of mine. He was a preacher in Wyoming. I gave a series of evening messages for him. At the end he said, “You are doing narratives every time. I do not know how to do that. I have been here for seven years, and I have never yet preached on a biblical narrative because I do not know how to do it.” You have to consider that 75% of the Bible is historical narrative. You are excluding much of the Bible if you do not get accustomed to working with narratives. When you do get accustomed to doing narratives, you will love using them. People get engaged with the story features of the Bible. You will realize that you can preach profound truths out of how the narratives unfold. You can show people the grace of God and how it is ultimately revealed in Christ. It is very enlightening to you, and it often engages people in powerful ways. You will love doing it once you get accustomed to it.

In a narrative passage, you test whether you are preaching an expository message by examining whether you have met several criteria. First, you have proven that your sermon’s points and principles are in this text. Is the truth you just stated provable from this text? Second, you have covered the scope of the text that is the narrative unit selected. A common approach is to use the Scripture introduction to prepare for and summarize lengthy passages. I often receive questions about this. Someone recognizes that he has a narrative that might be 45 verses long. You wonder whether you have to read the whole thing. It might take too much time. Often when you are preaching narratives, the Scripture introduction is where you give a few words of explanation or even a large summary of that text. Then you can read the portions that are most pertinent to your sermon. If you need particular phrases or interactions, you might summarize much and read little. Some people read a little, then summarize, then read a little more, then summarize, then read some more, and then summarize the end of the text. They can cover large amounts of material, but they are using that Scripture introduction to help people navigate through a larger narrative.

The Scripture introduction is where you might say, “Here we are in the life of David. David is fleeing from the Philistines. Nonetheless he is still looking to God. He has some men who are going to defend him. Let us read about what they do.” You might read that part of the passage. Then you might explain again, “When they came back, they honored David. David seemed to honor them, but he did something awful. Let us read what it was.” What I do is I summarize a long chapter. That is fine to do. The Scripture introduction becomes your great friend when you are preaching narratives. You can get much material in front of people by summarizing and reading key portions.

How do you prevent the notion that the preacher only read the portions he wanted? If you are doing that every week, then you cannot avoid the suspicion, because that is what you are doing. If people are regularly seeing how you handle a text fairly, however, then they learn to understand what you are doing. They see that you cannot handle that much material in that length of time. You are allowing them to see your compassion by not reading what would become unwieldy.

What makes a sermon expository is that you demonstrate, if necessary, that other parts of the text do not undercut your points and principles. In the occasion on which the prophet confronted David, he said, “You are the man.” David said, “I repent.” The prophet said, “You are forgiven.” Then you say, “See folks, as long as you confess your sin, you are forgiven, and everything is okay.” That sounds nice, but what happens next in the narrative? God says, “I am going to take your first son.” There is something that undercuts what you appeared to say. If there are pieces in the narrative that undercut the principles you have just said, then it is not going to be expository, and it will undercut your expository concerns. Consistency will help.

Note that there is not as high an obligation to cite verses as there is to cite content when preaching from a narrative passage. That might sound strange since we have made such a big deal in the epistles of saying that main points and subpoints must come from the text and you should show the verse in the text from which the points are made. In a narrative, however, if you say, “At that point, Goliath hit the ground. Look with me at verse 14b, which says, ‘Goliath hit the ground,’” they know all that already. If you need specific words or a phrase, it may be necessary to cite a verse. Sometimes in a narrative, however, it is sufficient to work off of common knowledge. That is a judgment call. It can become redundant if you unnecessarily point out things that people already know. It is different than didactic passages.

In narrative miracle passages, show how the event demonstrates God’s authority or Christ’s status rather than promising a repeat. Nothing scared me more in preaching early on than the miracle passages. I wondered what I was supposed to do with them. Do I tell people, “In your life, if you just...” Then I began to see, and others explained to me, that what was happening was unusual. Remember that there are long sections of Scripture and history in which there are no miracles. When miracles come it is because God established the authority of His Word or He showed the status of the Savior. So we have Christ in Mark’s series of events. He has control over the physical world, the spiritual world, and death itself. Christ’s status is established. These miracles are not promised as repeats. They are shown to demonstrate either the authority of God or Christ’s status. We do not have to fear them. We simply have to show the purpose of the miracles in the way that we preach them. Remember that there are long periods of no miracles, even in Scripture, thus if God does not always promise a miracle, then neither should we.

We are promising God’s grace. By showing or demonstrating the truth principles of the narrative, the preacher takes truth to contemporary struggle and thus fulfills the joy and purpose of a biblical message. My expectation is that when you pick out a narrative to preach on, my main goal is that you will look

back at this lesson and ask what grace principles are there. What does it tell me about God? What does it tell me about me? Identify grace principles, and then look at the text and identify what universal truths are there that the facts of the text will support. That begins to form your outline.

In the next lesson we will say not only why we are identifying these grace principles, but ultimately how they provide power for Christian sanctification. So far we have been talking about why we use redemptive truths and about some exegetical method. In the next lesson we will get to how this empowers the Christian life and why it is necessary for all preaching to motivate God's people to holiness.