

THE PREACHING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT—A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION

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FAITH AND REASON

Faith is highly rational, in all its acts of obedience towards God. It reckoneth, computeth, judgeth, chooseth, determineth, in the most exalted acts of reason. All these things are here ascribed unto Moses in the exercise of his faith. I would willingly insist hereon, to vindicate the honour of faith from the imputations that are cast on all its actings in the world, as weak and foolish; or that it is nothing but an engine or pretence set up unto the ruin of reason, and the use of it in the lives of men. And if we cannot prove that the wisdom of faith, and the reason wherewith and whereon it always acts, are the most eminent that our nature is capable of in this world, or that whatever is contrary to them, or inconsistent with them, is arrant folly and contrary to the primigential light of our nature and all the principles of reason truly so called, we shall freely give up the cause of faith unto vainest pretence of reason that foolish men can make.

Commentary on Hebrews by John Owen. Heb. xi. 24-26; Ob. viii.

The question about how to preach the Old Testament is not primarily a question of technique. It is rather a question of faith. We must decide clearly what we believe about the Old Testament before we can discuss how to preach it, for as preachers we can get no more out of the Scriptures than we have the faith to take, and the whole content and style of our preaching from the Old Testament will be determined according to our belief. The key to the ability to preach the Old Testament is not cleverness or skill, but faith. Therefore an article on Preaching the Old Testament must largely in the first place attempt to clarify our thinking as to why we must take this part of the Scriptures more seriously than is usually done today as the text of what we have to say to our people in the name of Jesus Christ.

1. *We must preach the Old Testament because here in its history, we have a pattern of the Lord's dealing with His Church and its members.*

The Old Testament is not simply a prophetic book—a witness to One who is yet to come. It is rather the history of the actual dealings of this One with His people before He came. Moreover, His dealings with them and His relation to them are characteristic of the relation between Jesus Christ and His Church.

The Old Testament is the story of a nation, and of individuals within this nation, whose life and destiny were controlled by One who interfered with them, joined them to Himself by identifying Himself with them, mastered them, blessed them—One whom they called *Lord*. Even when they rebelled and had to be judged, the Lord would not let them go, and though punishing them, He held them in His hands for the purpose for which He has chosen them. To be in the hands of the Lord meant to be conformed to a pattern of death and resurrection, judgment and salvation. It meant to be led in ways that were terrible and mysterious.

Those who served Him most loyally within this nation, and who were closest to Him, suffered the more for being nearer to the Lord. The spiritual leaders of Israel were broken, penitent, trembling, men—so different from the saints and moral heroes of other religions! They do not appear as calm unified personalities, or strong self-reliant characters. There is little of the 'mystic' about them.

Yet these men and this nation experienced blessing and peace and joy from the same Lord who brought them under such judgments. A song of joy rings through the pages of the Old Testament that the true servants of the Lord are able to sing even in the darkest hour. The Psalms which express this gladness and peace belong to no one period of Israel's history. Even when apparently God-forsaken, they could put their trust in the Lord. They rejoiced in the forgiveness of sins.

Who is this One who is dealing with His people thus?—putting them through such experiences of judgment and salvation in His hands—ordering their national life so that it conforms to this pre-ordained pattern of death and resurrection, meeting its leaders at various times under strange angelic and miraculous forms, visiting His temple continually to bless His people with peace? Our answer to this question must be: He is the same One who later became man in Jesus Christ. We must preach the Old Testament with this always in mind. When we do, we have a freedom and boldness in interpreting the text that otherwise cannot be found. It brings us nearer to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and the rest, to realise that in a real sense they dealt with Him who is the same yesterday, today and for ever.

2. We must preach the Old Testament because it gives us the ways of thinking and the categories of thought by which the meaning of Jesus Christ and the New Testament can alone be properly understood and confessed.

In sending Jesus Christ into the world, God had to prepare the minds of men with ways of thinking, and vivid analogies by which the meaning of Jesus Christ, His work, His sacrifice, His purpose, might be rightly understood and interpreted. Throughout Israel's history, God is preparing a people who will be able to receive the New Covenant at the appointed time, and a place where His Son can be born. He is preparing Mary, whose attitude in shaping the human form of Him who is to be both God and man is the fruit of centuries of divine training. He is preparing a people with a language that can at last confess Him adequately.

The Old Testament is not only the history of God's actual dealings with His people; it is the story of the preparation for Christ. It is full of types and shadows that figure forth His historical form. It is full of stories that give certain actions and certain words a meaning which is to find its true use in later days in understanding the words and actions of Jesus. The whole of the Old Testament story has its contribution to make towards this end. The sufferings, judgments, defeats, victories, of Israel, and the meaning they faintly found in them, help towards the understanding of the sufferings of God's Son and His victory. The structure and exclusiveness of the temple, the elaborate and minutely prescribed ritual of sacrifice and priesthood—all contribute towards an understanding of that one sacrifice that was made on the cross for ever. The prophets who were raised up to prevent Israel from having a blind faith in its ritual, to teach the nature of the true sacrifice which alone could please God, and to point to the coming One, also played their part in preparing the way of the Lord. The kingdom was set up in Israel and the figure of the king was given a temporary glory so that the people might be able to conceive and hope for an eternal kingdom.

Jesus, it is true, in proclaiming Himself as the redeemer, accommodated His word and action to the humble part that was prophesied of Him in the Old Testament writings. He sought to play a part that fulfilled even the most humble prophecy of Him. But these humble forms and concepts to which He so graciously accommodated Himself are really adequate to convey the true meaning of what happened between Bethlehem and Calvary and afterwards. We must preach the Old Testament with all this in mind. Knowing Jesus Christ who has come in the flesh, we can know and understand better than the prophets themselves, the meaning of what they wrote. In telling our people that this man Jesus is the Christ to which the Old Testament writers bore witness as the coming One, we can express more adequately and clearly than they ever could, what they were

trying to say to their times. But we can use the forms and texts and stories they give us and fill them with a new meaning that is nevertheless their true meaning.

3. *We must preach the Old Testament because it still, today, pleases Jesus Christ to give His own living witness to Himself through these very Scriptures which shadow Him forth so vividly.*

When the two disciples were on the road to Emmaus, the risen Jesus drew near. They did not recognize Him, and it was not till He entered their house, and in the sacramental action of the breaking of bread gave thanks, that they knew Him. But He did nevertheless seek to prepare them for the final recognition all the length of the journey on foot by expounding to them the Scriptures—and of course the Scriptures were the Old Testament writings. 'Did not our hearts burn within us as He spoke to us by the way?' We have thus in this Emmaus incident the risen Jesus mediating Himself to His disciples through the Scriptures and through the sacrament.

It is still His way to do this to His people in the Church. He still draws near when men speak about Him to one another in faith, and in our attempts to preach the Old Testament we must never forget that the risen Christ on more than one occasion gave living witness to Himself through these Scriptures. Perhaps it will not be so difficult to preach the Old Testament when we remember this. If we are faithful in pointing to Him through these Scriptures, our success will depend again, not on our skill so much as on *His* drawing near.

FROM A WISE MASTER-BUILDER

I mean by 'preaching the gospel' preaching the love of God to sinners, preaching the life, death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ, with all the blessings which in consequence thereof are freely given to true believers. By 'preaching the law' I mean explaining and enforcing the commands of Christ briefly comprised in the Sermon on the Mount.

. . . What is the stated means of *feeding and comforting* believers? What is the means, as of *begetting spiritual life* where it is not, so of *sustaining and increasing* it where it is? . . . Some think preaching the law only; others, preaching the gospel only. I think neither the one nor the other; but duly mixing both, in every place, if not in every sermon.

I think the right method of preaching is this. At our first beginning to preach at any place, after a general declaration of the love of God to sinners and His willingness that they should be saved, to preach the law in the strongest, and closest, the most searching manner possible; only intermixing the gospel here and there, and showing it, as it were, afar off.

After more and more persons are convinced of sin, we may mix more and more of the gospel in order to *beget faith*, to raise into spiritual life those whom the law has slain; but this is not to be done too hastily neither. Therefore it is not expedient wholly to omit the law; not only because we may well suppose that many of our hearers are still unconvinced, but because otherwise there is danger that many who are convinced will heal their own wounds slightly; therefore it is only in private converse with a thoroughly convinced sinner that we should preach nothing but the gospel.

If, indeed, we could suppose an whole congregation to be thus convinced, we should need to preach the gospel; and the same we might do if our whole congregation were supposed to be newly justified. But when these grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ, a wise builder would preach the law to them again; only taking particular care to place every part of it in a gospel light, as not only a command, but a privilege also, as a branch of the glorious liberty of the sons of God. He would take equal care to remind them that this is not the cause but the fruit of their acceptance with God . . . that we are still forgiven and accepted, only for the sake of what (Christ) hath done and suffered for us; and that all true obedience springs from love to Him, grounded on His first loving us. He