

ILLUSTRATING THE RELEVANCE OF OLD TESTAMENT
NARRATIVE THROUGH THE EXPOSITORY PREACHING
OF ESTHER AT HOPE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH,
PORT LAVACA, TEXAS

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To my wife, Shawna,
and our girls Lilia, Annemarie, and Caroline,
thank you for your love, encouragement,
and perseverance.

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PREFACE

This project represents a new stage in ministerial preparedness. For almost ten years my family and I served as church planting missionaries in Santiago, Chile. During this time a growing disquiet arose within me concerning my own inability to faithfully exposit God's Word and what appeared to be a dwindling commitment by missions-minded, North American churches to faithful biblical exposition and sound doctrine. Upon returning to Canada, my commitment to expository preaching and reformed theology, as well as my love for the Old Testament, became the incentives God used to direct me to further theological training. It is my desire to continue to glorify God by being a more trustworthy student and preacher of His Word.

Certain people have been of great personal help; without them this project would never have been completed. I want to thank my family—my wife, Shawna, for spurring me on when I lacked perseverance and our girls, who paid the price of not having me at home at times. To the people at Hope Fellowship Church, my first pastorate, I pray that this endeavor has brought you many spiritual blessings. To my father, Andy Houser, without whose editorial commitment this paper would never have been completed, thanks so much. Lastly, to Byron Wheaton, my first pastor, whose faithful exposition of the Old Testament still resounds in my mind, I am indebted.

Kevin Richard Houser

Port Lavaca, Texas

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project was to preach the book of Esther expositively so that the congregants of Hope Fellowship of Port Lavaca, Texas, grow to understand and appreciate the importance of Old Testament narrative for their spiritual lives.

In this project it was my intent to accomplish three primary goals that would serve as the criteria for evaluation. The first goal was to assist the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church understand the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for Christians living in the twenty-first century. The development of such an understanding is important because most of the congregants of Hope Fellowship have only a rudimentary appreciation for the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative. This reality is in part because they have been falsely taught that the Old Testament is of little importance and has little relationship to the full revelation of Christ in the New Testament. It is also partly because of the difficulty of bridging the historical and cultural gap that exists between the life of Old Testament saints and the modern world.

The second primary goal was to continue grounding the church in biblical doctrine. Hope Fellowship is a young church that was birthed out of a seeker-friendly model of worship and evangelism that devalued solid biblical preaching. This need, coupled with the reality that a large proportion of congregants were saved later in life as adults, means that the theological underpinnings of their faith are weak. It was the expressed desire of the leadership of Hope Fellowship that the church grow deeper in its theological understanding of and commitment to the Word of God.

I also hoped to achieve a third goal, which was to sharpen my preaching skills. Hope Fellowship is my first pastorate. While I gained considerable ministry experience

in my ten years of overseas missionary service, I lacked specific experience in preaching. My personal aspiration to grow in my preaching ability complemented perfectly the desire of the leadership of Hope Fellowship to grow deeper in their understanding and commitment to the Word of God.

Ministry Context

Hope Fellowship is located in Port Lavaca, Texas, the largest town in Calhoun County, and is situated on Lavaca Bay, part of the Texas Gulf Coast midway between Galveston and Corpus Christi. As part of the larger Matagorda Bay, it boasts the largest and deepest bay system as well as the best natural passes or entries to the Gulf of Mexico on the entire Texas Gulf Coast. Despite being a small town on the coast only two hours south of Houston, Port Lavaca is still an affordable vacation area, providing excellent fishing and sailing. Because it is part of the Texas coastal lowlands, Port Lavaca has been prone to hurricanes and has been hit hard three times in the last century.

Port Lavaca has a population of 12,600 and serves as the regional hub for six other smaller communities. As with much of Texas, Port Lavaca has a substantial Hispanic population. At present only 59.7 percent of the population of Port Lavaca speaks English at home, while 35.6 percent speak Spanish in the home.¹ The influence of the Latin culture can be felt and seen in the simple fact that there are twenty-one Mexican restaurants in a town of only 12,600 people. Port Lavaca also has a surprisingly large Taiwanese population, due to the presence of the Formosa Plastics Company. People of Taiwanese descent make up 4.1 percent of the overall population.²

¹City-Data, "Port Lavaca, TX Houses and Residents" [on-line]; accessed 8 February 2008; available from www.city-data.com/housing/houses-Port-Lavaca-Texas.html; Internet.

²Ibid.

Over the past twenty-five years Port Lavaca has seen a dramatic shift in its employment base. While oil drilling, cotton, commercial fishing, and shrimping are still important elements of the local economy, the town of Port Lavaca has been instrumental in attracting five major industrial manufacturing plants to the area. This level of industry has provided much needed economic stability for the region. According to Dennis Patillo of the Port Lavaca Real Estate Board, Calhoun County is one of the most promising regions for future economic growth in all of Texas.³ The rate of unemployment for 2007 was a respectable 4.4 percent.⁴

Hope Fellowship is part of the Guadalupe Association of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, one of two state conventions within Texas affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Hope Fellowship was originally named “Parkway by the Bay Church” and was the church plant of Parkway Baptist Church of Victoria, a town situated thirty miles west of Port Lavaca. Parkway Baptist is a community-based church that was influenced by the Willow Creek model of worship and that desired to reach people for Christ through innovative and “culturally appropriate” means.⁵

Beginning in 1995, the Lord began to move the hearts of several members of Parkway Baptist Church to plant a church that would model genuine Christian life and hope and would be focused on outward evangelism of the community. While there were

³Dennis Patillo, “The Future Economic Potential of Port Lavaca,” speech delivered to weekly Rotary Club meeting, 1 February 2008, Rotary Club of Port Lavaca archives, Port Lavaca, Texas.

⁴FDIC, “Profile for Port Lavaca, Texas” [on-line]; accessed 12 February 2008; available from <http://www.ePodunk.com/cgi-bin/genInfo.php?locIndex=26922>; Internet.

⁵The Willow Creek seeker sensitive model promotes reaching unchurched people through the creativeness of human ingenuity instead of Gospel proclamation. Aspects of the gospel that are deemed offensive to seekers are downplayed or removed, leaving a void of biblical theology. It is a model based on Arminian and semi-Pelagian principles, denying man’s utter inability to save himself and the necessary role of the Holy Spirit in producing faith unto salvation. The ingenuity of the service, including polished music, sermons that emphasis popular culture, and the uncritical use of multimedia, are the most important elements that bring people to Christ.

already a number of churches in Port Lavaca, including five other Southern Baptist churches, it was believed that there was still a large unchurched population that was not being reached by traditional means of evangelism.

After training in Victoria, the first three small groups were started in Port Lavaca in April 1996, meeting in homes in the community. The focus of these meetings was on prayer and “packaged programs” of study that were dependent on multimedia to attract people. Over the next two years the fledgling movement saw God work mightily through small group relationships and the family atmosphere of the small group setting to provide healing and growth in many lives.

By the spring of 1998, Parkway Baptist felt the leading of the Lord to draw the three groups together to form a church. With guidance from Parkway, a core group of people began meeting in the March of 1998. The first formal service as a church was on July 26, 1998.

From the beginning Parkway by the Bay, today known as Hope Fellowship, has desired to be a church designed around the coming together of small groups rather than simply a church *with* small groups. Indeed, sermon-based small groups known as Berean Heart Groups, remain a fundamental component of the church ministry. From the outset, it was also a conscious decision to plant a church that would respond to the perceived needs of the community through culturally relevant evangelism events based on the principles of the Willow Creek Church.

Over the next two years, the ministry of the church was typified by active community outreach and led by a ministry/worship team from Parkway Baptist Church that was contemporary and innovative. While there was a core group of around seventy people committed to the ministry, services sometimes reached one hundred and twenty people. In early 2000 the church started renting two spacious units of the local Wal-Mart plaza on Highway 35, the main street bisecting Port Lavaca, and enjoyed good public visibility.

In June 2000, the church called its first full-time pastor, Jason Goings. While the church continued with a contemporary service, the use of prepackaged programming became less predominant and a slow move toward biblical exposition and reformed doctrine commenced. Over the next seven years the church saw slow but steady growth, with average attendance growing to around eighty. By the beginning of 2007, Hope Fellowship had fully changed direction from a seeker-friendly style of worship and evangelism to a contemporary church based on Reformed doctrine.

In January 2007 Jason Goings resigned from Hope Fellowship, believing not only that he had reached his capacity to lead the church in Reformed doctrine, but that the Lord was leading him to prepare for missionary service. In July of 2007 Hope Fellowship called me as their pastor, a Canadian with ten years missionary service in Chile, South America. Key in the decision to call me was the church's desire not only to continue growing in their understanding and commitment to Reformed doctrine but also to have solid biblical teaching in the form of expository preaching. While the church maintains a contemporary worship style, the integration of expository preaching from a covenant theology perspective has been well received.

In March 2008, Hope Fellowship implemented their first Sunday school program, with classes for both adults and children. These classes were the first Sunday school program in their history. Despite attendance slumping to thirty after Pastor Going's resignation, attendance started to increase again after only three months, with an average of fifty worshipers every Lord's Day. Coupled with the original core values to remain a church based on small groups, to maintain a contemporary worship style, and to continue to reach the community in relevant ways, the leadership also desires to be *the* vocal witness of the sovereignty of God in the community of Port Lavaca.

Today there is renewed excitement about the future of the church in this new stage of life. It is the desire of the leadership that Hope Fellowship be a church that

speaks to our modern society with a biblically relevant message, has solid doctrinal convictions, and encourages future leadership from among its membership.

Rationale

In 2 Timothy 3:14-17,⁶ the apostle Paul admonishes Timothy that he must continue in what he has learned and believed because it has made him wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. He continues his charge to the young minister of the Word saying that “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 competent, equipped for every good work.”

While Paul was writing directly to Timothy, these verses ring true for the lives of all Christians in all ages. The transformational aspect of Scriptures is certainly what Paul had in mind when he said that the entire Word of God is inspired and able to fully equip the believer.

Despite this basic affirmation, few churches today appear to be aware that Paul was, in fact, verifying the inspiration and transformational nature of the Hebrew Bible or *Tanakh*, the thirty-nine books that constitute the Old Testament for Christians. The Old Testament is all too often relegated to a place of secondary importance in the life of the modern church. While the church accepts that the Old Testament as part of God’s inspired Word, the Old Testament’s relevance is often not understood and communicated in the light of the full revelation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

This lack of understanding and commitment appears to be especially so when teaching or preaching Old Testament narrative. The stories of ancient kingdoms and foreign peoples are not taught in a manner that provides meaningful connection to the life of the people of God in the twenty-first century. When the genre of Old Testament

⁶All scripture references are from English Standard Version.

narrative is taught, it is often done in an allegorical manner—one must have the same faith as David when he faced Goliath, or all one needs to do to prosper is to pray the prayer of Jabez. Old Testament narrative, however, when understood according to the norms of its genre and preached expositively, provides a rich mosaic of theology that is both relevant and practical for the modern Christian.

When I arrived, Hope Fellowship was a church that fit the typical mold described above. The church's congregants acknowledged the Old Testament as God's Word, but were unable to understand the relevance of the Old Testament stories for their lives. As noted, Hope Fellowship was planted according to a Willow Creek seeker-friendly methodology and which grew based on culturally sensitive thematic teaching blocks that can be purchased at any Christian bookstore. The result was a church reared on multimedia programming rather than solid exposition of Scripture.

This reality became particularly apparent to me in January 2008 when a woman who had been a member of Hope Fellowship since its inception ten years previously indicated that she did not realize that Israel had been split in two by a civil war. Over the next couple of minutes as we spoke, I realized that her understanding of the Old Testament was woefully lacking.

My desire through this project has been to see that the congregants of Hope Fellowship become aware of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for their lives through the expository preaching of the book of Esther. While many Christians seem to consider Esther to be fictional, a book that never directly mentions God and seemingly rewards godless behavior, the book of Esther deals with several important theological truths. I believed that as the congregants were exposed to the expositional preaching of this book, they would be awakened to the theological potential of all Old Testament narrative to provide spiritual growth in their contemporary world.

My conviction was and continues to be based on two understandings. The first is the quote from 2 Timothy 3:14-17 referenced above. Not only does the apostle Paul

say that all Scripture is inspired by God, literally “God breathed,” but also that all Scripture is able to make young Timothy wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The second is a belief that expository preaching is the best form of biblical communication.

Definitions and Limitations

In this project I used a number of terms based upon specific definitions. When using the term “expository preaching,” I did so in accordance to Greg Heisler’s definition as found in his book *Spirit-Led Preaching*:

Expository preaching is the Spirit-empowered proclamation of biblical truth derived from the illuminating guidance of the Holy Spirit by means of a verse-by-verse exposition of the Spirit-inspired text, with a view to applying the text by means of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, first to the preacher’s own heart, and then to the hearts of those who hear, culminating in an authentic and powerful witness to the living Word, Jesus Christ, and obedient Spirit-filled living.⁷

When using the term “genre” or literary genre, I was referring to Rene Wellek’s and Austin Warren’s definition in their book *Theory of Literature*:

Genre should be conceived, we think, as a grouping of literary works based, theoretically, upon both outer form (specific meter and structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose—more crudely, subject and audience).⁸

There were a number of challenges inherent in this project. First, the length of the project was short. I am fully aware that any aim to change people’s understandings and attitudes can take considerably more time than this project could allot. The project was designed to be implemented over a period of fifteen weeks and consisted of a one-week pre-project training time to prepare the sermon evaluation team⁹ as well as the congregation for the project implementation, a two-week adult Sunday school teaching

⁷Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching: The Holy Spirit’s Role in Sermon Preparation and Delivery* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007), 21.

⁸Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956), 219.

⁹The Sermon Evaluation Team was comprised of 2 men and 5 women, all adult congregants and with varying degrees of spiritual maturity. They were charged to evaluate each sermon according to a standardized evaluation form (see Appendix 13).

time that focused on why we need to study the Old Testament and narrative genre, a ten-week expository sermon series on the book of Esther, a concluding two week adult Sunday school teaching time focused on Sidney Greidanus' seven ways to encounter Christ in the Old Testament,¹⁰ and a one-week post-project evaluation time.

My desire in this project was to awaken the congregants of Hope Fellowship to the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative to their spiritual lives through expository preaching. It was also my desire that through expository preaching Hope Fellowship become more solidly grounded in the biblical doctrines that are presented in the book of Esther. Lastly, I wished to hone my skills as an expositor of the Word by focusing on better understanding how to preach Old Testament narrative in an impactful and relevant manner. Fifteen weeks was a very short time to accomplish the goals of this project.

Besides the definition listed above, a second delimitation was the use of the book of Esther as the basis for this project. I chose the book of Esther because it reveals God's providential care of His people, even though His transcendence is not always evident. I believe this is a key issue to interacting with our postmodern culture. I also believe that Esther is part of the received canon of Scripture and is therefore historical, inspired, and part of a complete understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture.

For the purposes of this project, there are two concerns that have been the source of contention. The first concern is the historicity of Esther. Several prominent scholars and commentators such as Michael V. Fox, Robert Gordis, and Adele Berlin deny the historical accuracy of the characters and events as portrayed in the book of Esther.¹¹ This denial of historicity further distances the relevancy and importance of the

¹⁰Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 203-24.

¹¹Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 131.

Esther narrative in the minds of preachers. The second concern, which is related to the first, is that there is little agreement among scholars as to exactly what genre the book of Esther represents. Some believe that it exemplifies a festive or Mardi Gras genre,¹² while others believe it is a Persian chronicle¹³ or even wisdom literature.¹⁴ Both of these concerns will be examined in chapter 3 where aspects of preaching theory will be applied to the specific challenges of the book of Esther.

Research Methodology

The goals of this project were to assist the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church become aware of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for their lives, to continue grounding the church in biblical doctrine, and to grow in my ability to preach. To accomplish these goals, I designed the project to consist of three key inter-related components. The first component was the previously mentioned ten week expository sermon series through the book of Esther. Each week I derived the sermon from the natural progression of the narrative and demonstrated a responsible Christ-centered methodology of interpretation. As we examined Esther's life and death decision to intercede on behalf of her people or discussed the evil intentions of others to inflict harm on God's people, it was my intent that the congregants of Hope Fellowship would see direct parallels between our world and the ancient context of the narrative. This connection would bring the narrative of Esther alive in the minds of the congregants and would develop an awareness of the importance and relevance of Old Testament

¹²Adele Berlin, *Esther*, Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), xvii.

¹³Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther: A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 3 (September 1981): 359-88.

¹⁴Shemaryahu Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (October 1963): 419-55.

narrative for them. A critical element of this component was a series of sermon evaluations which I collected after each Sunday morning service.

The second component was the incorporation of the church's small group ministry, known as Berean Heart Groups, into the project. The purpose in using these groups was to provide an intimate setting where people could review the sermon and be guided in a more personal application, thus making it relevant to their lives. I prepared questions directly from the sermon to guide the discussion and help participants make direct spiritual applications. The Berean Heart Groups met every week, and followed the sermon series.

The third component was a series of four Sunday school classes that deal with the nature and character of Hebrew narrative and with interpretational approaches to finding Christ-centered significance. These four classes combined laid the foundation for understanding how Old Testament narrative is relevant in the life of modern Christians.

Through these three inter-related components the project demonstrated a strong, consistent presentation of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narratives for Christians today and assisted the church to grow deeper in its theology. One of the key elements in narrative genre is that the narrative is moved forward by underlying theological truths. In the book of Esther, the theological truths that provide momentum for the narrative include God's providential care of His people, man's responsibility to live by faith, the reality of evil in the world, and an emergent Christocentricity in God's acts of salvation. As I preached through the book of Esther, it was my intention that the congregation would grow in their appreciation of narrative and become more grounded in the theology found within the pages of the book, appropriating these truths as part of their faith.

To evaluate the success of the first and second goals of this project, a survey was distributed among the congregants of Hope Fellowship. This survey asked specific questions designed to gauge the participant's general understanding of the relevance of

Old Testament narrative in their lives and to evaluate their basic understanding of the theological truths that are found in the book of Esther. I administered this survey at the beginning of the project (see Appendix 1) and again at the end of the project (see Appendix 2), thus providing a basis for evaluating whether the first two goals of the project have been reached.

The third goal of this project was to sharpen my expository preaching skills and accomplished through each of the project's three key components. First, the expository preaching series on the book of Esther dictated that I understood the character and flow of the narrative; interacted with its literary devices such as irony, reversals, and chiasm; as well as consistently applied a Christ-centered hermeneutic to the text. Second, teaching the Sunday school classes meant that I had to be fully conversant with not only the character of Hebrew narratives, but also interpretational methodologies. Third, by preparing the discussion questions for the Berean Heart Groups, I had to practice bringing the application of the text down to a personal level.

Achievement of this goal involved a weekly evaluation of my preaching by a Sermon Evaluation team representative of the congregation. By interacting with this examining group every Sunday afternoon, I hoped to receive constructive criticism that would direct positive change in both my sermon preparation and delivery of Old Testament narrative texts.

A constraint to the accomplishment of the third objective of the planned project lay in the reality that we are not a large congregation and that many congregants work shifts at one of the local manufacturing plants. At present Hope Fellowship has a running average attendance of fifty participants weekly. This attendance means that in order to have three to five people evaluating my sermons on a regular basis, I had to have another two or three prepared and ready to step in should someone be inhibited from participating. This preemptive measure also helped to provide stability over the duration of the sermon series which was ten weeks.

The key ingredient to attaining each of these goals was expository preaching. While it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who makes the Word preached efficaciousness in the lives of Christians, I believe that through expository preaching, both during the project and subsequently, the congregants of Hope Fellowship will become aware of the importance and relevancy of Old Testament narrative to their lives, be grounded in biblical theology, and have a pastor better trained to preach the Word. Truly effective expository preaching occurs when the Holy Spirit first convicts the heart of the preacher during his preparation and then, through the preacher's unique character and giftedness, powerfully convicts the hearts and minds of the listeners, resulting in true worship and joyful obedience.

Summary

This purpose of this project was to preach the book of Esther expositively so that the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church of Port Lavaca grow to understand and appreciate the importance of Old Testament narrative for their spiritual lives. The goals for the project were to assist the congregants to become aware of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for their lives, to continue to ground the church in biblical doctrine, and to grow in my ability to preach. To accomplish these goals, I designed the project to consist of three key inter-related components. The first component was a ten week expository sermon series through the book of Esther, with corresponding weekly sermon evaluations conducted by a Sermon Evaluation Team. The second component was to guide more personal application of the sermon through discussion questions in the church's small group ministry, known as Berean Heart Groups. The third component was a series of Sunday school classes that dealt with the nature and character of Hebrew narrative and with interpretational approaches to finding Christ-centered significance. Through these three inter-related components the project demonstrated a strong, consistent presentation of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for Christians today.

CHAPTER 2
THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE
THAT OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE IS
IMPORTANT AND RELEVANT

Many preachers and their congregations tend to diminish or dismiss the importance of the Old Testament and its relevance for Christian living. This problem is especially so when it comes to the genre of narrative, which is often considered to be simply an historical record. For many, the fact that the New Testament represents a new revelation and covenant has resulted in a corollary belief that the Old Testament is solely a covenant with the Jewish people with no relevance to Christians.¹

At the time of Christ, however, the Jewish faith was built on the assumption that the Scriptures, known by Christians as the Old Testament, were the express, divine revelation of God.² Christ Himself believed this understanding,³ and all of the books of the New Testament are built on this foundational assumption. In fact, the authors of the New Testament not only saw the Old Testament as divinely inspired, but also as the very means of explaining the full revelation of Christ (Eph 1:8, 9; 2 Tim 3:16, 17; Heb 1:1-4).

In chapter 1, the necessity of communicating the importance and relevance of the Old Testament to the lives of the members of Hope Fellowship Church was explored.

¹The modern church's propensity to disregard the Old Testament as unimportant is similar to Marcionism, an early Christian sect that disregarded the Old Testament as canonical which was denounced by the majority of the early Christian churches as heretical.

²Robert Redmond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 5-10.

³*Ibid.*, xxxi.

If the congregants of Hope Fellowship are to understand the importance and relevance of the Old Testament, and in particular Old Testament narrative in their lives, then a biblical foundation must be laid regarding the proper interpretation and application of Hebrew narrative. Specifically, two questions must be addressed: (1) How is the Old Testament, including the narrative parts, relevant? (2) What spiritual benefits can be gained from studying Old Testament narrative?

This chapter examines biblical evidence related to how the Old Testament was both understood and applied by New Testament writers to the life and faith of first-century Christians. Combined, this evidence provides the necessary foundation for a biblical approach to interpreting and applying Old Testament narrative to the lives of the congregants at Hope Fellowship.

The Relevance of the Old Testament

The Old Testament Scriptures are a compilation of books with different human authors, using many different literary genres, written over several centuries. Despite this diversity the Old Testament is an organic whole. No single book, no section of writings, no genre is more inspired or more holy than the rest (2 Tim 3:16-17). The sections that follow begin with the biblical evidence that attests to the importance and relevance of the Scriptures as a whole and, by extension, to all aspects that make up that whole and then progresses to specific evidence regarding the genre of narrative.

As a start, it is important to recognize that throughout the New Testament, the Scriptures are quoted and looked to for direction, guidance, verification, and rationale. It would have been very easy for the disciples, having spent three years with the Master, solely to extol His virtues. They did indeed extol Him. Yet, whenever they did so, be it by teaching or preaching, the Scriptures were the foundation on which the message of the glory of Christ was communicated.

If Christ spoke of Himself as the fulfillment of the Scriptures; if the apostles based their teaching and preaching on the Scriptures; and, if the early church (a church

built on personal eye-witness of Christ) relied on the Scriptures—the argument that a believer in Christ must accept the Scriptures as relevant and important is convincing.

Relevance Is Found in Jesus

The foundation to any biblical understanding of the centrality of the Old Testament is Jesus' own assertion that the Scriptures definitively point to Him as the fulfillment of all Scripture. Within the tapestry of Scripture “where others saw only a fragmented collection of various figures and hope, Jesus saw his own face.”⁴ In both post-resurrection appearances recorded in Luke 24, Jesus expounded from the Scriptures concerning Himself (περὶ ἑμοῦ), emphasizing that He was the central, unifying idea and that the entire Old Testament, in one way or another, pointed toward Him.⁵ In the first account on the road to Emmaus, Jesus even chastises Cleopas and the other disciple for not being able to discern from Scripture that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer before entering his glory. While modern scholarly opinion is that first-century Judaism did not anticipate a suffering Messiah, Jesus here clearly indicates that the Old Testament prophets did indeed have such an expectation.⁶ According to Jesus, the prophets not only spoke of the resurrection, but consistently testified to the necessity of the way of suffering that leads to glory.⁷ Because of this consistent testimony, Jesus admonished the disciples for being foolish and slow of heart for not believing. The force of Jesus' challenge clearly implies that the disciples should have by faith and knowledge of the Scripture anticipated His death and resurrection.

⁴Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 108.

⁵William Hendriksen, *Luke*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1065.

⁶Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1916.

⁷Hendriksen, *Luke*, 1064.

The comprehensiveness of Scripture to which Jesus spoke is identified in Luke 24:27 when Luke uses the traditional phrase “Moses and all of the prophets” to refer to the entire scope of Hebrew Scripture, and in verse 44 when he uses a tripartite division of Scripture, the law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms, to highlight the three major divisions that constitute the Old Testament. In so doing, Luke not only emphasizes the uniformity of the scriptural witness, but also speaks to the flow of Scripture and the progressive nature of the revelation of the Anointed One.⁸ This combined emphasis means that while directly prophetic texts obviously refer only to Him, other texts reflect patterns that Jesus escalates to show their eschatological inauguration or fulfillment in Him.⁹

The totality of scriptural witness is further emphasized by the repeated use of “all” in, “all things must be fulfilled,” “all of the scriptures” and “all of the prophets.” The overall thrust is that there is a comprehensiveness of the revelation that finds its ultimate meaning in Christ.¹⁰

Jesus is indeed the interpretive key to understanding the Scriptures. The Old Testament is a pervasive and consistent witness of Him and therefore important and relevant. The whole of Old Testament teaching fits together as one promise looking to Christ and this understanding is how it was always intended to be seen.¹¹ This unity of promise in Christ means that the flow of redemptive history must be seen as a single, continuous plan of God culminating in the suffering servant. Sidney Greidanus refers to this unity of redemptive history as the mighty river, which flows from the old covenant to the new and holds the two together.¹² The Christian stands, therefore, in the same

⁸Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1937.

⁹*Ibid.*, 1918.

¹⁰John Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35c (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 1205.

¹¹Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1937.

¹²Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids:

continuous path of salvation as Israel, but in the eschatological fulfillment of God's ancient promises.¹³ Because Jesus taught that His death, resurrection, and glorification were anticipated by the Scriptures, those same Scriptures provide for the attentive student of the Word a window into the eternal purposes of God.

God's Promises Are Fulfilled

The explosive advance of the Gospel message during the first years after Christ's resurrection commences with the Day of Pentecost. For Luke, the author of Acts, Stephen's sermon is emblematic of this explosive advance, a bold proclamation that Jesus Christ is the long awaited fulfillment of prophecy and the eschatological inauguration of the final stage of God's plan of salvation for the nations.

Opposition to the growth of the Gospel grows to such a pitch in the opening chapters that Stephen is charged with blasphemy against the temple and the law in Acts 6:13-15. When asked to defend himself of the charges in chapter 7, Stephen begins an apologetic defense that traces the history of Israel and demonstrates that it is in fact Israel who is in error. Stephen's speech, while not scholarly, was a powerful portrayal of God's unmerited mercy toward Israel, while at the same time unmasking the obstinacy and disobedience of both Israel and her leaders.¹⁴

Of note, Stephen's speech is built almost exclusively around Old Testament narrative. Only three non-narrative texts are cited—Amos 5:25-27, Isaiah 66:1, 2 and Psalms 102:25—and these are used as supporting texts for Stephen's narrative based argument. Stephen's discourse about Israel's repeated rejection of God's messengers and

William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 48.

¹³Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1918.

¹⁴Richard Longnecker, *The Acts of the Apostles*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 340.

its rejection of correct worship is an analysis deeply rooted in a Deuteronomistic perspective of nationhood¹⁵ and contains perhaps one of the densest networks of Old Testament material found in the New Testament.¹⁶

Stephen's historical overview begins with God's calling of Abraham and ends with Israel's desert wanderings. His speech burgeons with references to people and events found in Genesis and Exodus and includes numerous word-for-word quotations from the LXX. The central themes of his indictment are (1) Israel has continually failed to recognize the leaders God has sent; and (2) Israel has always responded inappropriately to God's presence as represented by the tabernacle and the temple.¹⁷

What emerges from Stephen's historical synthesis is a comparison between the offer of salvation in Moses and Jesus as Savior and between the people's incomprehension toward Moses and toward Jesus.¹⁸ This comparison becomes implicit typology in verse 37 when Peter quotes Deuteronomy 18:15, reminding his listeners that Moses prophesied God would send a prophet like himself to the people.¹⁹ In the same manner that Moses came to save Israel from slavery and was rejected by God's people, Jesus came to save even more fully and was likewise rejected.

The depth of Israel's past rebellion is reflected in Peter's recounting of Exodus 32. At the same time that Moses was receiving God's law on Mount Sinai, the Israelites below were making a golden calf to worship. By embracing idolatry and rejecting God,

¹⁵Darrell Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 277.

¹⁶G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 556.

¹⁷Bock, *Acts*, 276.

¹⁸Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 561.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 563.

Israel was rejecting the law, the very source of life.²⁰

Stephen then mentions the tabernacle in the wilderness and emphasizes that God cannot be contained in a place made by human hands. Even the Temple, constructed according to the pattern God had shown Moses, was never intended to become permanent, or halt the advance of God's plan for His people.²¹

Stephen's speech reaches its climax with his accusation in Acts 7:51-53. Using Old Testament phraseology, Stephen accuses his hearers of being stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart. In rejecting Christ, Israel has been covenantally unfaithful, just like their forefathers.²² Such resistance and ignorance could be expected from the Gentiles who did not know the will of God, but such reprehensible behavior was unpardonable in God's people. By rejecting Jesus, Israel has now surpassed the sins of their ancestors because they rejected the very person in whom God's plan and purpose were to be fulfilled.²³

Stephen's speech was a scathing indictment of the Jewish leaders for their failure to recognize Jesus as their Messiah²⁴ and was received by his hearers as apostasy in both content and tone.²⁵ Stephen's last words as he was stoned declared that the now exalted Christ was none other than the long awaited the Son of Man, the eschatological fulfillment of Daniel 7 who provides the nations with access to God.

In defending himself from the charges of being unfaithful to the law and the

²⁰Ibid., 564.

²¹Longnecker, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 150-51.

²²Bock, *Acts*, 304.

²³F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 152-53.

²⁴Longnecker, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 337.

²⁵Ibid., 349.

temple, Stephen demonstrates how Israel (1) looked to the promise of the Messiah, (2) often resisted God's will, (3) rejected God's anointed leaders, and (4) overemphasized the importance of the temple.²⁶

The means Stephen chose to present his defense was through a retelling of Israel's history as found in the narratives of Genesis and Exodus. Stephen's presentation was selective; at times he cited the text, while at other points he paraphrased or summarized it.²⁷ The result is a rich retelling of Old Testament narrative that proclaims Jesus as the eschatological fulfillment of God's ancient promises.

Clearly, an intimate knowledge of the original biblical narratives would be of great spiritual value for the Christian, as they provide the full biblical context for understanding the movement from promise to fulfillment in Christ. The importance of the Old Testament Scriptures is that they provide the very means for understanding who Christ is. In fact, the message that the eschaton had come in Jesus can be fully understood only if the Old Testament is indispensable to the lives of New Testament believers. The Savior of the nations has come. One must not fail to recognize and worship Him.

The Scriptures Are God-Breathed

Second Timothy is a letter of encouragement from the imprisoned apostle Paul to his protégé Timothy in Ephesus. In 3:14-17, Paul encourages Timothy to be faithful because false teachers have found their way into the church in Ephesus and Timothy must remain faithful in order to refute their evil ways. Over the centuries 1 Timothy 3:14-17 has become one of the most important New Testament texts defending the inspiration and authority of the Bible. An understanding of these verses demonstrates the importance of

²⁶Bock, *Acts*, 306.

²⁷Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 570.

Old Testament in the life of the church.

In verses 14-15, Paul exhorts Timothy to abide or remain steadfast in the teachings that he has learned and been convicted. Timothy is to have confidence not only in the trustworthy character of those who taught him but, more importantly, in the excellence of the sacred writings or Scriptures which he has known since childhood.

In describing these “sacred writings,” Paul uses the anarthrous plural ἱερὰ γράμματα, an uncommon New Testament construct (the article τα is most likely a scribal addition). Paul uses the anarthrous construct again in 3:16-17, this time the singular πᾶσα γραφή, to emphasize that *all* Scripture is God breathed.²⁸ In choosing these uncommon phrases, Paul is stressing the completeness and sanctity of Scripture as a cohesive whole. Paul’s language is deliberately inclusive and does not emphasize one genre over another. This inclusivity means that indeed all Scripture, including narrative genre, is of equal spiritual importance.

The Scriptures, Paul continues, are breathed out by God, literally “God-breathed.” While Paul does not negate the human element involved in inscripturation, his emphasis is on divine inspiration, meaning that every aspect of the Old Testament was under God’s personal superintending ministry and is recorded exactly as He wanted it.

Since the Scriptures are God-breathed, they are indispensable in the life of a Christian. They are the divinely appointed means of making a Christian wise for salvation through faith. In other words, the Old Testament is of great spiritual value because it disciplines a person in obedience to God and points to the coming Messiah, through

²⁸William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 566-68. Mounce details the interpretational dilemmas that arise from Paul’s use of the anarthrous singular πᾶσα γραφή and arrives at the salient conclusions that while the unarticulated singular “Scripture,” γραφή, is most often used to describe a single passage of Scripture, it can be rightfully used to describe the whole of the OT and thus emphasizes the completeness of Scripture. In the same fashion, the adjective πᾶσα with an unarticulated singular noun is should be translated as “all.”

whom salvation would be made available.²⁹

Second Timothy 3:14-17 provides a vital link in understanding the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for the modern church. While the Christian faith now applies the phrase “all Scripture” in verse 16 to the completed canonical form of the Bible, Paul’s immediate context was the writings of the Old Testament. Because the Old Testament is divinely inspired and authoritative, it provides the basis for godly understanding and living.

Spiritual Equivalency

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul warns the Corinthians (10:1-13) of the dire consequences of persisting in their idolatrous ways. He does this by drawing specific typological parallels between the situation of the Corinthians and Israel in their desert wanderings.³⁰

With the whole of the Old Testament to draw from, Paul marshals his argument exclusively from narrative genre. In 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, Paul refers to four specific events in Israel’s desert experience: all Israel was under the cloud (Exod 13:21, 22); passed through the Red Sea (Exod 14:21, 22, 29); ate the same spiritual food (Exod 16:4, 15, 35); and drank the same spiritual drink (Exod 17:5-7).³¹ Paul then reminds the Corinthians that because God was displeased, His chosen people were overthrown in the wilderness (Num 14:16, 29, 37; 26:65). In 10:6-13, Paul references five narrative events of ungodliness in the life of Israel for which God overthrew His people: coveting food

²⁹Ralph Earle, *1 and 2 Timothy*, in vol. 11 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 409.

³⁰Gordon F. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 442.

³¹Simon Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), 327.

(Num 11:4), engaging in idolatry (Exod 32:4, 6, 19), committing immorality (Num 25:1-9), testing Christ (Num 21:4-9), and grumbling (Num 14:2, 36; 16:1-35).³²

In all, the apostle references nine narrative events in the life of Israel in order to emphasize his spiritual lesson to the Corinthians. While Paul could have undoubtedly made reference to events from other Old Testament genres, such as poetry or prophecy, he did not. The very fact that he used narrative references exclusively demonstrates the truth already discussed that all Scripture is useful for the church and is important in the life of Christians. In order to understand the relevance that Paul gives to these narrative texts, however, we must now deal more in depth in regards to the typological parallels he establishes between the church in Corinth and Israel.

Typology is the means of biblical interpretation, which asserts that there is a divinely intended salvific equivalency between people, institutions, or events in the Old Testament and their corresponding realities in the New Testament.³³ In other words, New Testament typology is the tracing of God's recurrent principles of redemption in history, which He fulfills fully and perfectly in Christ.³⁴ In 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, there is no doubt that Paul intentionally draws typological parallels between Israel and the church at Corinth because he deliberately uses the words τύποι and τυπικῶς, cognates of τύπος.

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, Paul begins by calling Israel "our fathers," thereby emphasizing the Corinthian church's continuity with God's past actions.³⁵ Paul then, in a mixture of analogy and typology, relates Israel's crossing of the Red Sea and being sustained by manna and water from the rock in terms of Christian baptism and

³²Ibid.

³³Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 724.

³⁴Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 213.

³⁵Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 444.

communion.³⁶ In verse 4, Paul even specifically interprets Israel’s experience of receiving water from a rock christologically, thus indicating how guilty Israel really was and tying the prefiguring events to the situation in Corinth.³⁷

In 1 Corinthians 10:6, Paul begins the pericope by referring to the events of the previous verses by saying, “Now these things took place as examples (τύποι) for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.” Here the impact of Paul’s typology is that Israel had a form of baptism and communion that prefigured the Christian church; nevertheless, because God was displeased with them, he let most of them die in the desert. Israel is a formative model of ungodliness for the church, something to avoid at all costs.

As previously noted, in verses 7-10, Paul highlights five specific examples of Israel’s ungodliness that were typologically equivalent to the situation in Corinth. Of particular importance is verse 9, where Paul’s interpretation of Numbers 21 is that Israel “put Christ to the test.”³⁸ Paul applies these examples directly to the Corinthians: first by using them as examples of why God at different times overthrew Israel; and second by using them as a warning that the Corinthians were not above the same condemnation. Paul’s argument is that both the Corinthians and Israel were christologically tied together in their experience of putting Christ to the test.³⁹

In 1 Corinthians 10:11, Paul again uses the word τυπικῶς, a cognate of τύπος, in order to reinforce the tightest of Christological relationships between what happened with Israel and what was transpiring in Corinth. “Now these things happened to them as

³⁶Ibid., 443-44.

³⁷Ibid., 449.

³⁸Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 331. P⁴⁶ and other witnesses attest that *Christ* is the best variant.

³⁹Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 457.

an *example* and⁴⁰ they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11).

For Paul, the church at Corinth stood at the beginning of the end times.⁴¹ What Israel had done in the desert was providentially written down with the express purpose of admonishing the Corinthians and all Christian believers who also stand in the end times, not to follow Israel’s ungodly lead.⁴² Speaking of the Corinthian believers who may be less aware of the typological relationship between Israel and the church, David Garland writes,

They have blithely ignored the warning siren blaring from the biblical accounts of Israel’s chronic idolatry and terrifying punishment. If the wilderness generation met such a horrifying end by spurning a concealed Christ who nurtured them throughout their journey, how much more the Corinthians will be condemned if they spurn the revealed Christ.⁴³

Garland’s words highlight the significance of Paul’s use of typology in 1 Corinthians 10. Instead of simply establishing an analogous moral relationship between Israel and the Corinthians, Paul uses τύπος hermeneutically, interpreting events recorded in the Old Testament from the perspective of the Christ-event.⁴⁴ As such, Israel is more than a formative moral model for Christians because there is a greater responsibility and accountability for those living in the end times. A correspondence exists between Israel’s experience of salvation and that experienced by the church today, a warning to eschatological “Israel” if they indulge in the same sin.⁴⁵ Since the nation of Israel was

⁴⁰The coordinating conjunction δε translated “but” in the English Standard Version is better translated “and,” as in the majority of other English translations. Using δε in an adversative sense weakens the typological argument.

⁴¹Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 334.

⁴²Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 205.

⁴³David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 465.

⁴⁴Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical τύπος Structures* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981), 182.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 259, 275.

condemned for ungodliness, Christians can be assured that a similar condemnation will befall them if they follow in Israel's example. Since Israel was condemned for testing a concealed Christ, how much more will New Testament believers who spurn the revealed Christ be condemned?

The life of the church today and the experience of Israel in the desert are inextricably connected. While both received the blessings of God, the disobedience of Israel stands not only as a formative model of ungodliness, but a pre-presentation of the condemnation that will occur for those who live in the light of the full revelation that is Christ but who likewise sin. With this connection in mind, the Christian can read the narratives of the Old Testament and be admonished not to lust after evil as Israel did. If Christians continue to lust after evil, they can be assured of condemnation.

True Cleansing Is Now Available

The book of Hebrews is one of the most important books of the Bible for understanding the relationship between the old and new covenants. The author's desire is to demonstrate the absolute supremacy of Christ, the eschatological ramifications of Christ's incarnation, and to warn believers against falling away. What is especially interesting is that Hebrews shows the importance and relevancy of narrative genre by being a sermon based predominately on typological exegesis of Old Testament narrative.

The movement of the sermon is masterful. In chapters 1-10 the author demonstrates that Christ is God's supreme revelation, and thus superior to the angels, Moses and Aaron. Chapters 11-13 are a call to persevere in the faith and in godly living. Throughout the book, the author presents the truth of God's infallible purpose in Christ by quoting extensively from the Old Testament. While there is little consensus among scholars as to how many times the Old Testament is referenced, William L. Lane proposes that there are

thirty-one explicit quotations and four more implicit quotations, a minimum of thirty-seven allusions, nineteen instances where the OT material is summarized, and thirteen more where a biblical name or topic is cited without reference to a specific context.⁴⁶

Of these, thirty-nine references and twelve quotes are from the Pentateuch.⁴⁷

The theological apex of the author's argument comes in chapters 8-10 in the deliberate use of τύπον in Hebrews 8:5 and ἀντίτυπα in Hebrews 9:24, both cognates of τύπος. In Hebrews 8:5 it is revealed that Moses built a τύπος, or copy, of the tabernacle according to the σκιᾶ, or shadow, of the heavenly tabernacle revealed to him by God in Exodus 25:40. In Hebrews 9:24, the author expounds that Jesus, having finished His work of atonement and having purified the ὑποδείγματα or copies of the things in the heavens, entered into the ἀντίτυπα or heavenly sanctuary. Here the author's use of antitype is unique, as the heavenly sanctuary (type), which existed prior to the earthly sanctuary, follows the earthly in soteriological function.⁴⁸ This usage is the opposite of the normal use of type and antitype. Here the antitype denotes the physical Old Testament reality, while the type signifies the heavenly New Testament reality, which the physical Old Testament institution foreshadowed.⁴⁹

This New Testament heavenly reality means that the Christian enjoys an intimacy with God that was never possible under the Old Testament structure, but which was anticipated and foreshadowed. Christians are now partakers of Christ's permanent priesthood, with a more excellent ministry (Heb 8:6), a better covenant based on a better promise (Heb 8:6-13), and a better sacrifice (Heb 9:23) with better blood (Heb 9:13,

⁴⁶William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 47a (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), cxv, cxvi.

⁴⁷Leon Morris, *Hebrews*, in vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 7.

⁴⁸Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 362.

⁴⁹Ibid.

14)—in fact, a once-for-all, all-sufficient and efficacious sacrifice (Heb 9:25-10:18).⁵⁰

The importance of the Old Testament can now be more fully discerned. In order to comprehend and savor the blessing of salvation and the fulfillment of God’s eternal plan, the Christian must study and understand the Old Testament. Between the old and new covenants there is an essential unity and development of redemption.⁵¹ It is a unity and development that can be appreciated and rejoiced in by studying all of the Old Testament, including narrative genre.

Through the proliferation of Old Testament references and typology the book of Hebrews demonstrates the importance and relevance of the Old Testament for the church today, including narrative genre. It demonstrates that Jesus is superior in all ways to the ineffective sacrificial system found in the Old Testament. As it was unable to cleanse the conscious of sin, the old system was designed to compel Israel to seek and desire after a greater righteousness; “a qualitatively superior future salvation and Savior.”⁵² Understanding the plan of God in the Old Testament thus brings wide-eyed wonder and gratitude for the fullness of our atonement and the sovereignty of God that brought it about. The extensive appeal to the detail of the Old Testament demonstrates how valuable the Old Testament is for Christians concerned with the fullness of God’s revelation.⁵³

The Spiritual Benefits

The importance and relevance of the Old Testament is that it reveals the unchanging timeless plan of God, the beauty of Christ as the focus of all revelation, and the promise of salvation that the Christian experiences in fullness. Because the Christian

⁵⁰Ibid., 347.

⁵¹Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, cxvi.

⁵²Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 226.

⁵³Ibid.

church is the New Israel of God (Rom 11:16-24; Gal 3:29; Eph 2:11-13), the fulfillment of the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:1, 6-13; 9:14,15; 10:10-19; 12:22-24), a growing appreciation for the Old Testament strengthens faith, renews hope, and provides a window into the nature of God and His eternal purposes. This spiritual importance was demonstrated in the previous sections and is further highlighted in the sections below.

Hope and Faith

In Luke 24:32 God opens the eyes of Cleopas and the other disciple and they are able to recognize Jesus as the one with whom they had walked to Emmaus. Reflecting on their time with Jesus, they remembered how their hearts burned when he opened the meaning of the Scriptures to them. While Cleopas and the other disciple had the advantage of hearing how all Scripture pointed to Jesus from His own mouth, this is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. For Christians who grow in their understanding of Christ's central and unifying role in the Scriptures, a deeper love and passion for Christ is fostered; hearts are warmed, spirits illuminated and hope is revived.⁵⁴

In verse 44, Jesus speaks further of God's eternal purposes in terms of His suffering and death as the fulfillment of the plan of God: "that all things must be fulfilled." Jesus confirmed to the disciples that it was necessary for things to work out the way they did because they had been anticipated by God and were indispensable to His plan. Since this is the case, Christians who grow in their Christocentric view of the Old Testament will find a corresponding confidence in the sovereign plan of God and a greater appreciation of God's eternal purposes. In this manner the timeless attributes of God, His unchangeable nature, perseverance, grace, mercy and wisdom are highlighted.

⁵⁴Hendriksen, *Luke*, 1066.

Training in Godliness

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Paul declares that “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 competent, equipped for every good work.” Specifically, since the whole of the Old Testament is God-breathed, Paul says that it is profitable, ὠφέλιμος, for teaching, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness. The whole of the Old Testament is therefore an invaluable tool in the development of right orthodoxy and right orthopraxy. This training in godliness has an express purpose in 3:17, as indicated by the preposition ἵνα, meaning “in order that”—that the man of God may be competent or complete (ἄρτιος), fully equipped for every good work. This singularity of purpose means that because the Scriptures are God-breathed and not the machinations of man, they provide divine training in godly living. Scripture, therefore, is indispensable for the Christian, as it provides not only the content but also the guidelines for living.⁵⁵

Abounding Hope

In Romans 15:1-6, Paul continues his exhortation from the previous chapter to bear one another’s burdens by encouraging those who are stronger in their faith to support their weaker brothers. In verse 3, instead of pointing directly to Jesus as their example to emulate, Paul chooses to quote Psalm 69:9, a Psalm frequently applied in the New Testament to the anguish of Christ on the cross.⁵⁶ By appealing to Psalm 69, Paul is using the Old Testament Scriptures as the final word of his argument, thus demonstrating its divinely authoritative nature and ongoing importance in the life of the church.

In Romans 15:4, Paul defends his use of the Scriptures by making the bold statement that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that

⁵⁵Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 570.

⁵⁶Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 868.

through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” When Paul refers to “whatever was written in former days” he is not simply referring to anything old, but rather what was written in Scripture. This all-encompassing aspect is evidenced at the end of verse 4 where Paul says that through the encouragement of the Scriptures, along with patient endurance, the Christian finds hope. This basic premise, coupled with the understanding that the word “whatever” (ὅσα) is inclusive, indicates that Paul is not saying that there are some good things in the Old Testament, but that all of it was written for our instruction.⁵⁷

It is therefore evident that for Paul the whole of the Old Testament has tremendous spiritual value in the life of the Christian. Even though Paul in Romans 15:4 quotes only from Psalm 69, he extends this same authority and vitality to all the literary genres of the Old Testament, including narrative. In fact, the book of Romans contains no fewer than 55 direct references to or quotations from narrative sections of the Old Testament, the majority of which are found in chapters 9-11 and deal directly with the question of Israel’s present spiritual condition and place in God’s plan of salvation. As a result of Paul’s own copious use of quotes and references from Old Testament narrative genre, we can confidently assert that the narrative sections of the Old Testament are of equal importance in the spiritual life of Christians as other genres.

Paul’s lesson is that believers should be filled with zeal; “they should be eager to make sacrifices for the sake not only of their weak fellow-believers, but also, and most of all, for God.”⁵⁸ If the Messiah was willing to deny Himself and suffer for the benefit of others, how much more should Christians be willing to deny themselves? The argument is from greater to lesser and provides a divine moral example by which

⁵⁷Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 499.

⁵⁸William Hendriksen, *Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 471.

Christians are called to live.

Furthermore, the spiritual value of the Old Testament, Paul says, is that it strengthens the believer's hope. In fact, the express purpose for which the Old Testament has been recorded and preserved for the Christian is to increase hope; that as one reads the Old Testament and sees its fulfillment in Christ and the church it fosters hope.⁵⁹ This truth is of immeasurable spiritual value for Christians with the ever-spiraling problems of modern society. Therefore, the whole of the Old Testament, whether it is wisdom literature, prose, law or narrative, provides a fount of information about God's eternal plan of salvation in Christ, and directly fosters a living hope that transcends time. Patient and deliberate perseverance in the Scriptures will bring abounding hope.

Perseverance

The writer's extensive use of Scripture in Hebrews and his conviction of the continuity between the old and the new covenants has important implications for the church. While Hebrews 1-10 sets the theological stage for this covenantal continuity, the spiritual value derives from two areas. The first is a series of five warning passages (2:1-4; 3:7-19; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29) interspersed throughout the book. Each admonition provides readers with both a stern warning and a positive encouragement to persevere in the faith and not to ignore their reward and inheritance in Christ.

This emphasis on persevering in faith becomes the dominate theme of the book in chapters 11-13. Here, faith is first defined and then demonstrated in the lives of Old Testament men and women of God. Their lives are formative examples of faith to emulate. Central to the call to persevere in faith is the typological paralleling of the two covenants on Mount Sinai and Mount Zion in 12:18-24. Under the old covenant, fear ruled God's people as they approached Him. Today, because of the atonement of Christ,

⁵⁹Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 870.

the spiritual benefit for Christians is being able to come unto the city of the living God with joy and confidence. In the light of this superior revelation and this superior blessing, Christians are called to persevere in their faith and not drift away. The men and women of the Old Testament are examples of godly faith. How much more are Christians, who have the fullness of the promise, called to persevere? There is no temptation that is not common to all men. Therefore, rest in God's faithfulness.

Summary and Conclusion

The writers of the New Testament preached Christ from the Old Testament convincingly and with integrity because they saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament.⁶⁰ It is Jesus who gives meaning and validity to all of the Old Testament,⁶¹ including narrative genre.

The importance of the Old Testament to the church today is in understanding that we are heirs of salvation only by the mercy and grace of God and that we are uniquely and purposely grafted into God's eternal plan. The old covenant, while unable to bring true cleansing of the conscience from sin, foreshadowed a righteousness that would one day bring full atonement. The substitutiary death and subsequent resurrection of Jesus initiated the new covenant, fulfilling cultic typology and promises of Davidic kingship. The ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit inaugurated the end times and opened the eschatological floodgates for the ancient promises of God to the nations. Jesus is the hermeneutical key to unlocking the plan and the promises of God. The church today stands near the end of the plan of salvation, with the great responsibility to preach the Gospel to the nations. It is a plan that is impossible to fully understand or appreciate if not for the Old Testament Scriptures.

⁶⁰Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, 56.

⁶¹Ibid., 27.

The relevancy of the Old Testament for the church today comes from the understanding that there is continuity of a unified history of redemption between the old and new covenants,⁶² a spiritual equivalency based on a shared experience of salvation. God's grace requires an obedient response of faith from Christians, just as it did from the Israelites.⁶³ If men and women of the Old Testament who served imperfect and perishable things were able to persevere in faith unto the end, how much more so should Christians persevere who serve the full revelation that is Christ?

In the same manner, the temptations and failures of Israel in the desert wanderings serve as warnings of the greater condemnation that is ours if we too put Christ to the test. These failures were recorded primarily as a reminder for the present eschatological generation.⁶⁴ The church is the heir of the promises of God, and is called to live in a godly manner.

Because of its relevancy, the Old Testament provides training in wisdom and godliness. It is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and is of great spiritual value because it produces hope, encourages persevering faith, and disciplines a person in obedience to God.⁶⁵ The study of the Old Testament also provides the believer with a window into the eternal purposes of God, revealing in a deeper way God's sovereignty, providence, grace, and mercy. For the Christian who grows in their understanding of Christ's central and unifying role in the Scriptures, a deeper love and passion for Christ is fostered; hearts are warmed, spirits illuminated, and hope is revived.⁶⁶

⁶²Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 45.

⁶³Wright, *Knowing God through the Old Testament*, 70.

⁶⁴Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 205.

⁶⁵Earle, *1 and 2 Timothy*, 409.

⁶⁶Hendriksen, *Luke*, 1066.

CHAPTER 3
A MEANS FOR PREACHING THE NARRATIVE OF
ESTHER CHRISTOCENTRICALLY

Scripture is replete with good examples that demonstrate the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for the church today. The stories of Moses and David, and events like Abraham’s offering of Isaac, for example, readily provide opportunities to preach Christ from a redemptive historical perspective. Among Old Testament narratives of epic proportions, the story of Esther stands out as one of the most memorable; the story of a young Jewish girl who becomes queen of the strongest nation in the world in time to save her people from destruction.

While Esther holds an unparalleled place in the hearts of the Jewish people, not a single commentary was written about it during the first seven centuries of the Christian church.¹ John Calvin conspicuously excluded Esther in his commentaries and Martin Luther denounced it vehemently saying, “I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities.”² Indeed, God is not mentioned even once in the Protestant Bible’s version of Esther.

Despite these concerns and others raised over the centuries, the evangelical doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture does not permit the church to dismiss any book of

¹Karen Jobes, *Esther*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 21.

²Martin Luther, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, trans. William Hazlitt (Philadelphia: United Luther Publication House, n.d), 13.

the Bible as unworthy of study.³ In fact, a close examination of the narrative of Esther reveals a fertile field of spiritual truth and application for the modern church; a unique opportunity to bridge the gap of ancient and modern worlds.

In chapter 2, the biblical and theological rationale that Old Testament narrative is important for the lives of Christians was discussed. In chapter 3 the specific importance and relevance of Esther is probed. The chapter begins with an examination of the important challenges and concerns regarding the narrative text of Esther. The chapter then provides an examination of the theological themes of the narrative that provide a foundation for preaching Esther to the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church.

Homiletical Concerns Associated with Esther

Throughout the centuries the inclusion of the book of Esther in the Old Testament has been the subject of considerable debate among Protestant theologians. The book's purpose, historicity, genre and theology, have been vigorously disputed. Esther appears to be a secular story of the Jews who voluntarily decided to remain in the Diaspora rather than reunite with the restoration community in Jerusalem.⁴ In fact, the only textual link Esther seems to have with the rest of the Old Testament is that it relates the life of the Jewish people.⁵

If the book of Esther is to be preached so that it demonstrates its relevance to the life of the modern church, the preacher must address the concerns noted above. To that end a non-exhaustive study of the key issues follows.

³Jobes, *Esther*, 21.

⁴A. Boyd Luter and Barry C. Davis, *God Behind the Scenes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 213.

⁵Jobes, *Esther*, 19.

A Proper Starting Point

Many critics consider Esther to be fictional and not historical⁶—a tale written to rationalize a feast and to stimulate nationalistic sentiments. This concern is a serious challenge. The foundation of a response by evangelicals, however, does not begin with a study of the text itself, but rather with the affirmation of the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. Such an affirmation will help dispel some of the confusion and help provide guidelines for addressing the concerns associated with Esther.

The Protestant Old Testament, based on the Hebrew Massoretic Text, differs from the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, which are based on the Septuagint. While the LXX is a Greek translation of the MT, the narrative of Esther as contained in the non-protestant Bibles has six major additions totaling 107 lines of narration. The purpose of these scribal additions appears to be to resolve ambiguities in the Hebrew text.⁷ These additions are not considered canonical by Protestants and have been relegated to the apocrypha. Therefore, whenever this project refers to the book of Esther it is referred to it in the Protestant Bible.

Despite Luther's contempt for the book and Calvin's silence, Christians have considered Esther part of the canon of Scripture since the end of the second century.⁸ Since Esther is part of the received Word of God, the teaching of 2 Timothy 3:16 that "All Scripture is breathed out by God" must necessarily include Esther. Likewise, Romans 15:4, which says that "everything that was written in former days was written for our instruction," must also apply to Esther.

This affirmation of Esther's canonicity is important because it speaks to the

⁶Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (March 1976): 43.

⁷Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 19.

⁸Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 275.

character of Scripture, specifically its infallibility and inerrancy. Scripture is God's disclosure of propositional truths aimed at leading his elect to a saving knowledge of Him. If this record is inerrant, it cannot be mistaken on any detail which it mentions, and if it is infallible, it cannot misinform or deceive the reader by anything it says.⁹ God is not a liar, nor is He the author of confusion (1 Cor 14:33).

This understanding necessarily leads to the conclusion that, while the purpose of the Bible is not primarily to give scientific and historical information, any such data is fully true.¹⁰ Since Esther is indeed part of the received canon of Scripture, sharing equally in the qualities of infallibility and inerrancy, everything that the book affirms is true, even though it may presently appear contradictory to our understanding of history or nature. Any apparent discrepancies must be understood to be the result of insufficient corroborating information or the transmission of information from the unique vantage point of Esther's human author.

The Historicity of Esther

The consensus of many contemporary scholars is that Esther is not historical in nature.¹¹ Even those scholars who would contend that Esther is based on a minimalist "historical core" point to commonly recognized historical irregularities and argue that, in its present form, Esther is a fictional story with strong legendary characteristics.¹²

The question of Esther's historicity is of great importance. If the supposed

⁹Hywel Jones, "Doctrine of Scripture Today," Third Millennium Ministries, 8 April 2007 [on-line]; accessed 19 October 2009; available from http://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/hyw_jones/hyw_jones.DoctrineofScriptureToday.html; Internet.

¹⁰Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 223.

¹¹Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther: A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 3 (September 1981): 382.

¹²Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 131.

historical inaccuracies are as serious as some scholars claim, the book's truth is jeopardized and the authority of the text is eroded. So too, by extension, the truth and authority of the whole Bible is brought into question. However, an evangelical understanding should not be defined primarily by methodological approaches, no matter how scholarly the research appears. Rather, evangelicals must start with an acceptance of the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture.

This starting point means that the book contains more than just a historical core of a foiled plot to eradicate the Jews.¹³ Since the author's intention is that the book be read as a precise report of actual historical events,¹⁴ everything the book teaches is true, despite any supposed inaccuracies.

In his seminal book *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, Michael V. Fox details the supposed historical irregularities put forth by commentators over the years, listing five inaccuracies and six implausibilities and impossibilities, yet concludes that Esther is supposed to be read as historical.¹⁵ Robert Gordis, in his evaluation of the historicity of Esther, successfully demonstrates that the case for the historicity of the book of Esther is impressive.¹⁶ While there are as of yet no external sources that specifically corroborate the events of Esther, there is nothing intrinsically impossible or improbable with the book and it should be received as historical narrative. Since alleged historical problems are not insoluble, it is clearly preferable to take the book at face value rather than resorting to subjective or highly speculative reconstructions.¹⁷

¹³Ibid., 137.

¹⁴Ibid., 138.

¹⁵Ibid., 131-33.

¹⁶Robert Gordis, *Megillat Esther* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 8.

¹⁷Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (April-June 1980): 110.

The Genre of Esther

There is little doubt that Esther was written as a dramatic historical narrative, as it tells the epic story of the life or death struggle of an entire people. The book contains the basic elements of setting, plot, character, and theme, and does so in a highly stylized and artistic manner through the heightened use of such rhetorical devices as reversals and irony. The book's intricately organized literary structure, based on feasts and unforeseen "fortuitous" events, is amplified by multiple secondary themes such as the law and human responsibility. The convergence of these literary characteristics creates one of the most memorable stories of the Old Testament.

Esther's polished literary style, especially the central role of peripety, however, has been used by some commentators to further support their argument that Esther is fictional.¹⁸ The fact that Esther is an exceptionally well crafted story, however, does not diminish its historicity. Sidney Greidanus likens historical narratives to stained-glass windows "which artistically reveal the significance of certain facts from a specific faith perspective."¹⁹ This means that the author of Esther did not simply report the bare facts of what happened. Instead, through the use of cultural literary conventions of his day, the writer selected and arranged his material, thereby providing a divinely inspired interpretation that was designed to evoke faith.²⁰ Such an interpretation should not be seen as distorting the truth, but rather explaining the true significance of the events, as it was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who guided the interpretation of the biblical authors.²¹

Modern scholarly opinion regarding the genre of Esther varies. However,

¹⁸F. B. Huey Jr., *Esther*, in vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 788.

¹⁹Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 196.

²⁰Jobes, *Esther*, 35.

²¹*Ibid.*, 34.

having already affirmed the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, certain characterizations must be discarded, as they do not defend the historicity of the narrative.²²

There are several other theories regarding Esther's genre. Helmer Ringgren and Arndt Meinhold contend that Esther is best understood as a festival etiology. However, while the establishment of the feast of Purim is the central element of the narrative in chapter 9, to say that Esther was created simply to explain how the only major Jewish feast not mentioned in the Torah becomes so central to Jewish life, a festival argued by H. Gunkel as having pagan roots,²³ is insufficient. If, as previously discussed, Scripture is God's self-disclosure of propositional truths aimed at leading his elect to a saving knowledge of Himself, Esther must have a more direct and obvious God-centered objective.

An alternate theory, first proposed by S. Talmon, contends that Esther is best understood as a historicized wisdom tale, as it contains strong characteristics of Old Testament wisdom literature. Besides the aspersion that the term "tale" connotes, Talmon's theory fails to deal with non-Wisdom elements in Esther and overstates the category of Wisdom.²⁴

A third classification of Esther's genre, proposed by Robert Gordis, is that Esther was written in the form of a Persian chronicle. While this provides a strong argument why God is not mentioned in the book, Gordis maintains an etiological *raison d'être* for writing the story,²⁵ and doubts the full historical nature of the narrative.²⁶

²²Of note: Adele Berlin's theory that Esther is burlesque; R. J. Littman's and renowned Assyriologist J Lewry's belief that Esther is nothing more than a reworking of a Babylonian myth; E. Bickerman's theory that Esther is folklore; and Gillis Gerleman's theory that Esther is simply a reworking of a *heilsgeschichtliche* tradition about the Exodus story, adapted to fit the needs of a diaspora community.

²³Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," 44.

²⁴Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 143.

²⁵Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther," 375.

Some scholars have also argued that the book of Esther contains some features similar to Hellenistic romance²⁷ and that it is a historical novella or romance. This theory does not assert the story's full historicity, only that the characters and events of the fictional tale are based in some way on historical personae and realities.²⁸ This theory denies the full historicity of events and people.

As stated at the outset of this section, the best classification is that Esther is truly a historical narrative, which guards the historicity of a story of Jewish life in the exile by providing characters and events in real time and space. According to Fox, historical narrative is "a self-contained narrative mainly concerned to recount what a particular event was and how it happened, but with more literary sophistication than is usually evident in simple reports."²⁹ In this manner, a skillfully arranged presentation of selected material brings to life the theological truths of the story without jeopardizing its historicity.

The Theology of Esther

A major concern of theologians is Esther's apparent lack of religious themes. The very absence of the name of God in the narrative has led scholars such as Arndt Meinhold, Robert Pfeiffer, and Sandra Berg to propose anthropocentric interpretations that focus on human responsibility in shaping history.

While the writer of Esther avoids mentioning God even when it would seem most natural to do so, God is ever present even if unseen. His pervasive yet veiled presence is revealed through the series of unlikely circumstances, extraordinary coincidences and the remarkable reversals that characterize the plot.³⁰ While events such

²⁶Ibid., 383.

²⁷Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 145.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 150.

³⁰Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 323.

as Mordecai's discovery of the eunuchs' conspiracy, the king's insomnia and Haman's early morning arrival at the palace could be dismissed individually as remarkable coincidences, their cumulative effect is to unambiguously demonstrate the invisible guiding hand of God in the affairs of men. In the same manner, peripety reveals the indelible fingerprint of God in history, reversing expected outcomes in order to bring about His purposes. As a result, the central theme that prevails throughout the narrative is that God is invisibly caring for His people, fulfilling His covenantal promises through His providence.³¹

The overarching principle guiding interpretation of Esther is covenant. Israel had broken their covenant with God and as a result had been sent into captivity; the northern tribes to Assyria in 722 BC and the southern tribes to Babylon in 586 BC. Of all the curses promised in the Old Testament, by far the most feared was that of exile.³² Not only would Israel not dwell in the Promised Land but the very presence of God would be removed from amongst them. With the destruction of the Temple, God could no longer be spoken of as enthroned atop the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies and there was no way to make atonement for sin—He was conspicuously absent in the daily life of Israel.

During their time in exile, the Israelites became increasingly enculturated into Babylonian and Assyrian culture.³³ This enculturation, however, was more than simply a survival mechanism. In Jeremiah 29, God instructed the exiles to prosper in the land of their captivity and to seek the good of the city where they dwelt. Many Jews were able to follow God's instruction yet preserve a strong faith, as evidenced by the first return of exiles under Ezra. For others, however, the once foreign and distasteful aspects of their

³¹Jobes, *Esther*, 38.

³²Richard L. Pratt, *He Gave Us Prophets*, vol. 4 [video] (Fern Park, FL: Third Millennium Ministries, 1999).

³³Jerry Young, pastor of Beth Shalom Messianic Jewish Congregation in Houston, Texas, interview by author, 7 November 2009, personal notes.

surrogate culture would have become less distasteful with each successive generation. As each generation prospered, it appears to have become increasingly more difficult to uproot families and leave behind the life that they had carved out for themselves.

In 538 BC, King Cyrus gave the edict that the Israelites could return to the Promised Land, and many did so under Ezra, as noted above. Many others did not. It is in this context that the narrative of Esther takes place—seventy years after Cyrus’ edict, the Israelites in Esther still had not returned to the Promised Land. They had become complacent and even content to remain in the land of their exile, thereby compromising their spiritual identity.³⁴ It is for this reason that the character of Queen Esther should be regarded as a member of an unfaithful community, rather than a faithful covenant keeper.

It was for disobedience to the covenant that Israel was initially exiled. Failure to return to the Promised Land when they had the opportunity represented a further disobedience. In Isaiah 59:1-2, the prophet declares, “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or His ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.” Consistent with this admonition, God is specifically not named in Esther. The writer chose to demonstrate the spiritual truth that God had hidden His face from the disobedient because of their sin. This principle is reinforced through the message of divine silence.

Nonetheless, the book of Esther implies that even when God’s people are disobedient and far from Him, they are still the object of His love, and that He is working out His purposes in them.³⁵ The life of the Jewish people in Esther was contrary to God’s expectation. They had compromised their walk of faith, but because of His *hesed* or covenantal love God continued to preserve them. The great paradox is that God is always

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Huey, *Esther*, 794.

present, even when He appears conspicuously absent.³⁶

Christological Approaches to Esther

Esther, like the rest of the Old Testament, is clearly theocentric.³⁷ While there is a strong emphasis on human responsibility, the story is one of God providentially bringing salvation to the Israelites who were in captivity. Esther, however, must also be read Christocentrically, since Jesus Himself emphatically states in Luke 24 that He is the key to understanding all of the Old Testament. If the meaning of all Scripture is unlocked in the death and resurrection of Jesus,³⁸ it is of great importance that we find a means to preach Christ from the entire Old Testament, including the Esther narrative.

In his book, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, Sidney Greidanus establishes a responsible, contemporary methodology for preaching Christ that applies to the book of Esther.³⁹ There is often overlap amongst the seven “ways” identified by Greidanus and their usefulness and effectiveness varies. The rest of this chapter is devoted to applying these “ways” to preach Christ, with specific application to the Esther narrative.

The Way of Redemptive-Historical Progression

According to Greidanus, the progression of redemptive history, also known today as the “meta-narrative,” is the foundational means of preaching Christ from the Old Testament.⁴⁰ This way views every Old Testament text in the context of God’s

³⁶Jobes, *Esther*, 49.

³⁷Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 177.

³⁸Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 54.

³⁹Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, xii.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 234.

redemptive history, a progressive movement that reaches its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new creation.⁴¹ Redemptive history can be understood as the movement of a great flowing river, in which the goal is Jesus and God's rule over a restored and transformed creation.⁴²

Within the panorama of redemptive-history, the book of Esther holds a unique place. God, desiring to redeem His creation which was under the curse of sin after the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, had called Abram out of Ur and made a lasting covenant with him (Gen 15, 17). During the time of widespread famine that threatened to exterminate the lineage of the patriarch Israel, God provided salvation through Joseph in Egypt.⁴³ Later, having demonstrated His power to save by bringing His people out of slavery in Egypt, God subsequently reiterated and expanded His covenant of unmerited grace with Moses, a covenant which explicitly made Israel His treasured possession. God would dwell with them and give them rest, and they would be a nation of priests (Exod 19, 33, 40).

Israel, however, failed to fulfill its responsibilities and continually broke its covenant obligations. God, true to His promise in Leviticus 26:33, therefore sent His people into exile. With time God relented, and under Cyrus the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland. As already noted, while many did return, others did not.

While God remained conspicuously absent in the daily lives of those of His people who did not return to the Promised Land, His *hesed* or covenantal love saved them. God providentially made Esther queen, and guided the events of the day to enable her to successfully intercede on behalf of her people. Haman's plot was revealed; the

⁴¹Ibid., 237.

⁴²Ibid., 235.

⁴³Arndt Meinhold's theory that Esther is modeled after the Joseph narratives possess several interesting corollaries, but denies the full historicity of the events recorded in Esther.

Israelites defended themselves from their enemies; and Haman and his sons were killed, thus assuring the Jews' salvation. The people established Purim as an everlasting celebration of the rest that salvation gave the Jews from their enemies.

This temporary physical salvation, however, only foreshadowed Israel's greater need, spiritual salvation. In raising Esther as a physical savior, God was pointing to the Savior, Jesus Christ, who would save His people from their sin. God is always providentially caring for His people, fulfilling His covenantal responsibilities, even when His people do not do what is expected of them.

The Way of Typology

The many examples of apostolic typology in the New Testament teach us to view all of God's dealings with humanity as typological.⁴⁴ Therefore, even though the New Testament never directly references the book of Esther the way of typology is a valid means of preaching Christ from the narrative.

In this regard, Esther foreshadows the redemptive work of Christ. The Jews in exile were condemned to death under the Ahasuerus' law and Esther responds to Mordecai's strong exhortation to risk her life for the opportunity to rescue her people.⁴⁵ With the words "Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish," (Esth 4:16b) Esther prays and prepares to sacrifice herself, if necessary, to save her people.

A first typological equivalence between Esther and Christ is the need for a savior and the way in which each performs that role. Mankind is under divine condemnation and judgment of death for sin. Esther, like Jesus (Luke 3:22), found favor with the king, entered his inner sanctuary under the penalty of death and interceded on

⁴⁴Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 217.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 279.

behalf of her people. In Romans 8:2, Jesus saves His people from the law of sin and death, a law typified by Ahasuerus' irrevocable law of death. According to Hebrews 4, the promise of rest is now found in Christ.

A second source of typological equivalency is found in the character of Mordecai, as a co-redeemer. Once Esther reveals Haman's plot and pleads for her people, it is Mordecai who comes to the forefront of the narrative. It is Mordecai who receives the king's signet ring and who writes the new law that overrides the previous decree of death. It is the fear of Mordecai that comes upon all the peoples of the empire, and it is Mordecai who decrees the celebration of Purim as a day of rest from their enemies. In the last scene of the narrative, Mordecai continues to use his new found status to seek the good of the Jewish exiles and provide continuing rest. By comparison, it is Christ who reverses the penalty of sin and death and it is Christ in whom rest is found. Having procured His people's salvation, Christ is continually interceding on behalf of His people, seeking their good.

A third example of typological equivalence in Esther revolves around the establishment of Purim as a day of rest. Rest becomes an important theme in Esther, as the people of God are burdened by the threat of extinction. With the reversal of Ahasuerus' decree, the Jews throughout the empire are allowed to defend themselves. In celebration of this new found peace at the brink of extinction, Mordecai instituted, in perpetuity, the feast of Purim. This rest was guarded by Mordecai, who afterwards sought the welfare of his people from the position of second in command of the empire.

There is a parallel between rest secured in Esther and rest secured in Christ. However, while God provided rest for the exiles through Esther and Mordecai, it was only a temporary physical cessation of hostilities with the world. As such, it serves to accentuate the greater spiritual need of divine rest that is fulfilled in Christ (Hebrews 4).

A further typological avenue for preaching Christ from Esther is what Graeme Goldsworthy calls macro-typology, meaning that typological correspondence is to be

found not simply by equating persons, events or institutions, but also in “discernable stages or epochs that structure revelation.”⁴⁶ This type of typology seeks to discern God’s broad Gospel patterns of salvation in history.⁴⁷

In Esther, the people of God living in Babylon had chosen to stay where they had originally been exiled. Their lives are now threatened by the irrevocable law of Ahasuerus. Salvation arises from Esther, who intercedes and ushers in a period of stability under the leadership of Mordecai. However, the Jews must continue to live precariously surrounded by a world hostile to their existence. In the same way, mankind is in exile from the Garden of Eden. In Christ, the New Testament church has received salvation from the curse of the law and now lives in a period of inaugurated blessing. The church, however, still exists in a world of ungodly, earthly kingdoms.

In overview, the way of typology provides several strong avenues for preaching Christ from the book of Esther. The imminent need of salvation is met by a savior who interposes their life for the sake of their people. On a macro-typological level, even though the people of God have received salvation, they must learn to exist in a fallen world, awaiting the fulfillment of what has been inaugurated.

The Way of Analogy

Speaking of the use of analogy, Sidney Greidanus states that the preacher must inquire about the analogy between what God is and does for Israel and what God *in Christ* is and does for the church. They should inquire about the similarities between what God teaches his people Israel and what *Christ* teaches His church. And they should search for parallels between God’s demands in the Old Testament and *Christ’s* commands in the New Testament.⁴⁸

The similarity between the exiles of Esther’s day and the church today is that both need the salvation accomplished by a mediator. Further, both must continue to live in

⁴⁶Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*, 74.

⁴⁷Ibid., 111.

⁴⁸Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 263.

an ungodly world that has great influence on them, a world which threatens to compromise their faith. Both live in a sinful world where God does not appear to be present. Out of this context two striking lessons become clear. The first is that even though God's Spirit may not always be felt, the people of God must learn to trust and rejoice in His divine providence. God is continually at work, fulfilling His covenantal promises. Nothing can ultimately separate the people of God from the love of God (Rom 8:31-39).

The second lesson is that God likewise unfolds His will for individual lives through His providence.⁴⁹ This principle is indeed the lesson of Esther's life, as voiced by Mordecai in 4:14: "who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Yet along with the revelation of God's will comes the demand of human responsibility; acting in obedience to that will. "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish" (Esth 4:14).

Christians today are called to follow God's providential lead in our lives. God's will is being revealed day by day in the unfolding of ordinary events, and the true test of living for Christ is to be obedient in the place where we are, in whatever situation we find ourselves.⁵⁰ God leads silently and inexorably, from situation to situation, from decision to decision,⁵¹ and the Christian is to follow in obedience. This obedience is only possible in and through Christ. In everything, it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil 2:13).

In overview, the way of analogy can be successfully employed to preach Christ from the book of Esther. Our salvation comes through Christ's atonement, and in that relationship God is fulfilling His covenantal promises through His providence. These

⁴⁹Jobes, *Esther*, 46.

⁵⁰Ibid., 47.

⁵¹Ibid.

covenantal promises are not only corporate but individual, and demand human responsibility. God is at work building His kingdom through divine providence, and He calls men and women to join Him in that task.

The Way of Longitudinal Themes

The way of longitudinal themes focuses on the gradual development of biblical themes throughout the Bible. Since God's revelation is progressive in nature, in every stage of redemptive history God is revealing more of himself and His will.⁵² Because of progressive revelation, major Old Testament themes can act as highways leading to the person, work, and teaching of Christ.⁵³ In the book of Esther there are six themes that are important in the development of the narration: the providence of God; the presence of God; salvation and redemption; the law; and God's covenantal love.

The providence of God. The major theological theme of the book of Esther is the providence of God. From beginning to end, the principle governing the narrative is that His sovereign yet sublime provision and control exerts itself in history, nature and the lives of individuals.⁵⁴ God's providence extends to the nations (Pss 33:10-17), to the lives of believers (Pss 33:18-22) and to creation itself (Pss 33:6-9). God demonstrates His providential control in almost every narrative of the Old Testament, and is crystallized in Genesis 50:19-20 when Joseph reassures his brothers, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive."

In Esther, God's providence is redemptive in nature. Even though He is

⁵²Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 222.

⁵³Ibid., 267.

⁵⁴Leland Ryken, James C Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 681.

conspicuously absent in both the text and in the lives of His people, God reveals His presence through unlikely circumstances, extraordinary coincidences and the remarkable reversals that characterize the plot.⁵⁵ Not only does God guide the affairs of Ahasuerus' kingdom so that Esther becomes queen just in time to intercede on behalf of the people of God, but also the cumulative effect of such events as Mordecai's discovery of the eunuchs' conspiracy, the king's insomnia, and Haman's early morning arrival at the palace is to demonstrate unambiguously the invisible guiding hand of God in the affairs of men. In the same manner, the rhetorical use of peripety reveals the indelible fingerprint of God in history, reversing expected outcomes in order to bring about His purposes.

In the Gospels, it is God's providential hand that is orchestrating events and people in the life and death of Christ to move things to their appointed end in the salvation for His people. This truth is no more apparent than in Christ's final hours. From the soldiers mocking and casting lots for His clothes, to Pilate's prophetic sign claiming Jesus was the King of the Jews, God's sovereign purposes are being fulfilled through His providence.

Christians now have the assurance that because they have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, God's providential care is still at work in and through them for God's glory. "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28).

In overview, the book of Esther demonstrates God's ongoing providential care of His people. Of particular importance is God's providential care of His people in their redemption, a redemption that is now fulfilled in and through Christ.

God's covenantal love. God's providence toward His people is a result of *hesed*, His consistent, ever-faithful, relentless, constantly-pursuing, unmerited, lavish,

⁵⁵Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 323.

extravagant, unrestrained love. There was nothing about Israel that made her more worthy to receive God's love than any other nation, yet He graciously chose to bestow His *hesed* on them (Deut 7:7-8). Even when Israel failed to fulfill its obligations of the covenant because of repeated sin, God faithfully fulfilled His commitment to the covenant. God first bestows His covenantal love on Abram, calling him out of Ur and establishing an everlasting covenant with him and his generations, (Gen 15, 17) and reiterated and amplified it with Moses (Exod 20) and David (2 Sam 7).

The book of Esther teaches that even when God's people are disobedient and far from him, God continues to work out his purposes through them, as they are still the object of His covenantal love.⁵⁶ God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that He might redeem those who were the objects of that love (John 3:16).

The presence of God. Throughout Israel's wanderings in the desert, God manifested His presence and guidance at special times and in special ways through such means as fire, clouds, and smoke, but in Exodus 25:8 God commanded the people to build a portable sanctuary, in order that He may dwell with them. Exodus 40:34-38 reveals that when the tabernacle was accomplished God descended and dwelt with Israel. Later, this portable structure was replaced by the Temple, which also included the arc.

The importance of these two structures is that they conveyed in a very visible way, the transcendent presence of God.⁵⁷ When Israel sinned and was sent into exile, the temple was destroyed and God could no longer be spoken of as dwelling among His people. During the time of Esther, the Jews who refused to leave Babylon and repatriate had no access to even the most basic operational aspects of an altar. This reality is why God appears absent throughout the narrative; His transcendent glory was not dwelling

⁵⁶Huey, *Esther*, 794.

⁵⁷Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 849.

among them. The author of Esther further used divine silence to show the spiritual truth that God had hidden his face from them. While God's providence towards His people prevailed over their disobedience, the blessing of experiencing the presence of God was forfeited because of that same disobedience.

In the New Testament, Jesus fulfills God's promise of dwelling with His people. In Matthew 1:23, the angel of the Lord instructs Mary to name her baby Immanuel, meaning "God with us," thus fulfilling the prophecy Isaiah 7:14. John in his Gospel emphatically states that Jesus became flesh and tabernacled among us (John 1:14). Upon their profession of faith, the Holy Spirit indwells believers, sealing them in Christ unto the final day of their redemption (Eph 4:30). With this indwelling, Christians have the assurance that one day they will dwell with God forever. Revelation 21:3 says it most eloquently: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man; He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God." In the meantime, God is continually present in believers in Christ.

Kingdom. In the Old Testament, God's kingship was the prevailing pattern of Israel's identity and it included strong national and political overtones.⁵⁸ This political identity, God's kingdom on earth, was lost, however, when God sent the nation into exile. So not only was the Kingdom of God apparently absent, so also was the earthly kingdom.

Throughout the book of Esther, Ahasuerus' autocratic reign is silently and sublimely contrasted with God's invisible, providential care. Psalm 2 speaks of an ongoing battle between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God, a battle that has its roots in Genesis 3:5 between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. The existence of this battle in the narrative of Esther is demonstrated by two realities. The first is found in Esther 3:1, where Haman is described as an Agagite, a mortal enemy

⁵⁸Ibid., 479.

of the Israelites. The second is the threat of genocide, which speaks of an evil force at odds with the people of God.

As a result, there is an underlying plot of conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of Satan in this world. One of the questions that propel the narrative forward is will the invisible kingdom of a silent God prevail against Haman's plan of annihilation?

In the Gospels, Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God has arrived and that citizenship is determined by spiritual rebirth, not natural birth. This kingdom is not a physical realm, but a spiritual kingdom; one that has been inaugurated in Christ's first coming, but awaits its consummation at His second coming. At that time, God's perfect theocracy will forever rule over the new heavens and the new earth.

Since God's kingdom is not yet consummated, the battle between the forces of righteousness and the forces of evil is ongoing. For the people of God, however, there is victory amid conflict because through His perfect obedience to God the Father, Jesus has forever defeated the power of sin (Rom 6:10-11) and death (Heb 2:13) and not even the gates of hell can prevail against His church (Matt 16:18). While Christians still battle with sin during their lives, they live with the assurance that they are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and a member of God's kingdom on the basis of Christ's righteousness (1 Cor 6:9, 10).

Salvation. The meta-narrative of the Old Testament is of God's desire to redeem a fallen world.⁵⁹ God, in the quintessential act of salvation in the Old Testament, set His covenantal love upon Israel and redeemed His people out of slavery. Salvation for Israel was from Egypt to life in the Promised Land.

In the book of Esther, the Jews in Babylon were again in desperate need of

⁵⁹Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 234.

God's saving grace. In response, God providentially raised up both Esther and Mordecai as proto-saviors and their actions provide physical salvation for the Jews at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. It is important to notice, however, that salvation does not change their plight. While the book of Esther ends with Mordecai as second in command and seeking the welfare of the Jews, the capricious reign of Ahasuerus continues as before.

When God saved his people from famine by taking them into Egypt, it was a physical salvation through Joseph. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He provided physical salvation as well as the basis for a greater spiritual salvation yet to be realized. In Esther, God again provides physical salvation but remains absent and silent. The Jews must await the spiritual salvation that would come through the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31. This spiritual salvation was hinted at in the proto-Gospel of Genesis 3:15, and is now procured by faith for both Jew and Gentile in the once for all sacrifice of Christ. Christ gave His life as a ransom (Mark 10:45) and, by means of His atonement, Christians are freed from the slavery of sin (Gal 4:7). Christian's are redeemed by Christ (Luke 1:68). It is a salvation from sin to life in Christ. Salvation is eternal and secure because it is based on the perfect righteousness of Christ. Much like the kingdom of God, it is a present reality, but it awaits final consummation at Christ's second coming.

Law. The law in the Old Testament, often called the Law of Moses, articulated God's spiritual and moral expectations of Israel; guidelines to enable them to live in covenant with Him.⁶⁰ It is because of Israel's repeated disobedience by breaking the law of God, the requirements of the covenant, that God sent the nation into exile. The theme of God's law is highlighted in the book of Esther by way of contrast with Ahasuerus' autocratic rule. The capricious, impulsive, and irrevocable nature of Ahasuerus' law silently stands in opposition to the perfect law of God.

⁶⁰Ibid., 489.

In the New Testament the law is spoken of as holy, just and good (Rom 7:12) and anyone who wishes to follow Christ must conform perfectly to all its demands (Matt 5:20; 23:3). The problem, however, is that no one can be justified by trying to conform to the law, as it only brings a knowledge of sin (Rom 3:19-20). In Romans 8:1-5 Paul states that what God's law was unable to do, God accomplished through His Son Jesus Christ. The Spirit of life in Christ makes the believer free from the law of sin and death.

In overview, the way of longitudinal themes provides many rich opportunities for preaching Christ in the book of Esther. Jesus fulfills the law, provides true salvation, inaugurates the kingdom of God, and secures the blessing of the presence of God.

The Way of Promise-Fulfillment

One of the great theological questions that propel the narrative of Esther forward is whether God has forgotten His people and His promises. The three great promises of God that are prominent in the book of Esther are rest, salvation, and His presence. As these promises have already been discussed at some length under typology and longitudinal themes, a condensed discussion of each will follow.

Rest. Rest as a prominent theme in Esther revolves around the establishment of Purim as a Jewish celebratory day of rest from their enemies. Threatened by Haman's plan of annihilation, the Jews are saved when God providentially raises up Esther to intercede before king Ahasuerus. Esther secures the right for the Jews to defend themselves and they kill over 75,000 of their enemies. In celebration of this new found peace, the people establish the feast of Purim. The narrative ends with Mordecai continuing to seek the good and peace of the Jews as Ahasuerus' second in command. The hard won rest received in Babylon, however, is physical and temporary. It serves to point the Jews to the unfulfilled promise of true spiritual rest.

The inception of God's rest is found in Genesis 2:2 and rises to special prominence as a sign of obedience to the covenant in Exodus 31:16-17. Despite the

expectation of the wilderness generation that they would find rest in the Promised Land, Hebrews 4 maintains that God's true rest was never entered into in the Promised Land; it only foreshadowed a greater spiritual rest that is found in Christ.

Jesus promises this rest to all in Matthew 11:28 when he says "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." True rest or peace with God is shared by all who are born-again of the Spirit of God. Christ fulfilled the righteous demands of the law, including the Sabbath, and in so doing brought cessation from the struggles of life and ended enmity between God and man. Believers may experience this rest in part here in this world, but it will be consummated fully at Christ's second coming.

Salvation. The Old Testament is the story of God's redemptive work of salvation on behalf of His chosen people. In the book of Esther, the Jews who were still living in Babylon, even after having the opportunity to return to the Promised Land, are again in desperate need. In response to Haman's plot, God providentially provides salvation through Esther, who acts as a type of savior and interposes her life on their behalf. This salvation, however, is only physical and temporary.

This physical salvation underscores Israel's greater need of spiritual salvation. As previously noted, the proto-Gospel of Genesis 3:15 hints at this spiritual salvation, but it is now procured by faith for both Jew and Gentile in the once for all sacrifice of Christ. Christ gave His life as a ransom, and by means of His atonement, Christians are redeemed from the slavery of sin. For the Christian, salvation is from sin to life in Christ. It is eternal and secure because it is based on the perfect righteousness of Christ, but it is experienced only in part here in this world. Salvation's final consummation will be realized only at Christ's second coming.

The presence of God. One of the great promises of blessing in the Old Testament is that God would manifest His glory to Israel in a special way by dwelling with them and being their God (Exod 29:45-46; Ezek 37:27, 43:7, 9). The blessing of

God's transcendent presence was represented in a visible way by the arc of the covenant in the Holy of Holies. There, atop the ark, between the two cherubim, God was enthroned; with His feet on the mercy seat (Exod 25:22).

When the Temple was destroyed and Israel carried away into captivity, God could no longer be spoken of as dwelling with His people. His transcendent glory was not visibly enthroned atop the mercy seat. The Jews of Esther's day had sinned by deciding to remain in Babylon, in what amounted to an unwitting, self-imposed extension of God's judgment. Since God was not enthroned, His presence was conspicuously absent in their daily lives. His divine silence is noticeable in the narrative.

The continued absence of God's transcendent presence, even to the end of the narrative, acutely accentuates the contrast between what was lost due their sin and the promise of Immanuel that was yet to come. As such, the narrative of Esther acts as a lens, clarifying what was lost and pointing to a greater spiritual reality in Christ.

In the New Testament, Jesus fulfills God's promise of dwelling with His people in that He tabernacled among them—became flesh. He is Immanuel, meaning "God with us," and it is because of His sacrifice that all Christians have the assurance that one day they will dwell with God forever in the New Jerusalem.

In overview, the way of Promise-Fulfillment provides many rich avenues for preaching Christ from Esther. Jesus is God's provision for true spiritual rest; He provides God's people salvation from their sin; and through His atoning sacrifice brings Christians into God's eternal presence.

The Way of Contrast

The New Testament often teaches Christ by way of contrast. Instead of focusing on the continuity between Christ and the Old Testament, the way of contrast focuses on the discontinuity that Christ brings.⁶¹ As such, the message of the Old

⁶¹Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*, 224.

Testament often stands in stark contrast to that of the New Testament.

In many ways, the book of Esther is a study in contrasts. Life for the Jewish people in this exilic context was in every way contrary to God's desire for them. As such, their context serves to sharpen the discontinuity between salvation as represented in the Old Testament and Christ's work of redemption in the New Testament. Unlike Esther who is fallible and sinful, Christ is God made flesh. His intercession was accomplished only as a result of His own perfect obedience to the Father, thus fulfilling the righteous demands of the law, and His sacrificial death.

The Way of New Testament References

One of the most obvious and direct ways that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament is through the means of citation. Many times the authors of the New Testament, in a desire to communicate the full meaning of their message, buttressed their teachings by citing Old Testament passages.⁶² While these references are often direct quotes, many are simply allusions to past people, places, or events. By using Old Testament references the author reveals meaningful spiritual relationships between the Old Testament and the New Testament through the means of promise-fulfillment, typology, or longitudinal themes.⁶³

While the book of Esther is never directly quoted in the New Testament, Beale and Carson maintain that New Testament authors allude to Esther no less than eighteen times.⁶⁴ In reviewing these texts, it is apparent that nine of the eighteen allusions are only connected tenuously through shared religious colloquialisms and traditional rhetorical devices. While religious idioms like "sack cloth and ashes" and rhetorical

⁶²Ibid., 269.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1175.

devices, such as the juxtaposing of “weeping and mourning” or “laughing and rejoicing,” show possible evidence of shared longitudinal themes, they do so only remotely. Likewise, references to fasting only marginally correspond, as they are common religious activities.

Of the remaining nine New Testament references Beale and Carson repeatedly use the words “remotely echo” to describe their possible relationship to Esther. None of these allusions, however, are directly applied to Christ or His redemptive work.⁶⁵ Even the three most promising allusions are too remote in context to be useful. Antipas’ promise to give Salome up to half his kingdom in Matthew 14:3-4 only echoes Esther 2:9 when the wording is manipulated to do so.⁶⁶ John 16:32 merely has wording similar to Esther 5:10 and 6:12 in that someone “went to their own home.”⁶⁷ Even the gift of the ring to the prodigal son in Luke 16 is only reminiscent of Ahasuerus’ bestowal of his signet ring to Mordecai in Esther 8:2. Despite sharing some form of verbal equivalency, even these references only suggest the most distant of connections.

In short, there are no quotations or direct references to Esther in the New Testament. Even though there are eighteen possible allusions to the book of Esther, none of them can be directly associated with Christ’s redemptive work.⁶⁸ As such, preaching Christ in Esther through the way of New Testament references is not productive, nor convincing. While these verbal allusions may assist in better understanding longitudinal themes in Esther, they themselves are too strained to provide a clear means to preach Christ. Their echoes are too muffled.

⁶⁵Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 279.

⁶⁶Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 50.

⁶⁷Ibid., 497.

⁶⁸Johnson, *Him We Proclaim*, 279.

Summary and Conclusion

Despite the negative reactions and aspersions the book of Esther has received over the centuries, it shares equally in Scripture's qualities of inspiration and infallibility. Difficulties of historicity are not insurmountable and the narrative is best understood as a highly stylized and dramatic historical account of Jewish life in the exile. In spite of its secular appearance, Esther is most definitely a God-centered book, with God's providential care for His people being the central theme. Through the repeated use of peripety and unforeseen, fortuitous events, the invisible hand of God is seen as orchestrating the events of history.

Since Esther is part of the received canon and Christ averred that He is the interpretative key to all Scripture, it is of great importance that Esther be preached from a Christ-centered vantage. When Sidney Greidanus' seven ways are applied to the narrative of Esther, only the way of New Testament references fails to provide rich avenues for preaching Christ.

The book of Esther stands as a unique chapter in God's redemptive providence. Because the Jews of Esther's day had remained in exile, great theological themes of the Old Testament such as salvation, kingship, and the providence and presence of God are underscored by way of contrast. Yet not only do these themes highlight what should have been, but they also point to the greater spiritual need that was accomplished in Christ.

CHAPTER 4

A PLAN FOR MAKING OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE IMPORTANT AND RELEVANT

This chapter discusses the implementation of a plan to make Old Testament narrative important and relevant at Hope Fellowship Church, in Port Lavaca, Texas. The first step in the implementation of the project was a survey that confirmed the congregation's pre-project understanding of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narratives for their spiritual lives. I developed and refined the strategy for implementing the project in response to that survey and associated analysis. On the pages that follow, a preliminary overview of the project and its components is presented. This overview is followed by a more detailed examination of the implementation of those components.

Overview and Context

Hope Fellowship Church is one of only two churches in Port Lavaca committed to reformed theology, and the only Baptist church committed to expository preaching and reformed theology. Over the past several years, the congregation has had a growing awareness of its inability to appreciate and apply the God-centered meaning of Old Testament narratives to their lives. The purpose of this project is to lead the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church to understand the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative by preaching expositively through one of those narratives, the book of Esther.

In order to meet the needs of the church, I undertook an initial study in order to grasp the congregation's understanding of Old Testament narrative. I then derived and implemented a plan of action based on the information from this initial study. At the end

of the project I conducted the initial survey again at the beginning of the worship service on Sunday, December 15, 2010.

Preliminary Survey

As noted, I conducted an initial study at the outset of the project. This study took the form of a survey (Appendix 1) which I carried out at the beginning of the morning worship service on Sunday August 22, 2010 at Hope Fellowship. The survey included questions related to a wide range of issues associated with Old Testament narratives. Part A of the survey dealt with variables such as age, education, and the number of years a person had been saved. Part B included questions related to both knowledge of Old Testament narrative and understanding of theological principles. Part C contained ten short-answer questions specifically related to the book of Esther. In total, thirty-one congregants participated in the initial survey.

Confirming the Purpose of the Project

After analyzing the information from the initial survey, the next step was to confirm the three primary goals that would assist in the achievement of the project's purpose. The first goal was to lead the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church to understand the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for Christians living in the twenty-first century. The second goal was to continue grounding the church in solid biblical doctrine. The third goal was to sharpen my expository preaching skills so that I can be a better communicator of God's truth and continue to lead the congregants of Hope Fellowship in their ongoing understanding and spiritual growth.

Project Components

The project comprised three key inter-related components designed to meet the project goals. The first component was an expository sermon series through the book of Esther. Each week I derived the sermon from the natural progression of the narrative and demonstrated a responsible Christ-centered methodology of interpretation. A critical

element of this component was a series of sermon evaluations, which I collected after each Sunday morning service. The sermons and their corresponding evaluations took place between September 12 and November 21, 2010.

The second component was the incorporation of the church's small group ministry, known as Berean Heart Groups, into the project. In these Berean Heart Groups, participants discussed specific questions of application derived from the sermons. The Berean Heart Groups met every week, following the sermon series, from September 12 to November 21, 2010.

The third component was a series of Sunday school classes that dealt with the nature and character of Hebrew narrative and with interpretational approaches to finding Christ-centered significance. I taught the first lesson over the two weeks of Sunday, August 29 and Sunday, September 5, 2010. I taught the second lesson over the two week period of Sunday, November 28 and Sunday, December 5, 2010.

The Initial Survey and Study

In 1988 a group of people from the nearby city of Victoria founded Hope Fellowship as a community-based church with a Willow Creek Church model of worship, but over the years had desired to become a more traditional church. Under the church's former pastor, Hope Fellowship maintained a contemporary style of worship while incorporating a commitment to the doctrines of grace and expository preaching. Under the present spiritual leadership with its commitment to expository preaching from a covenant theology perspective, the congregation's general lack of biblical theology and their inability to apply Old Testament narratives to their lives has become increasingly apparent. The number of people who came to the leadership of the church after services earnestly desiring to understand more demonstrated this lack of understanding and inability to apply Old Testament Scripture. It was this need of the congregants of Hope Fellowship to understand and appreciate the importance of Old Testament narrative for their spiritual lives that prompted this project.

Underlying their need was a growing hunger in the congregation to mature in their understanding of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narratives for their lives. This hunger prompted the question, “How can the leadership of the church best meet this need?” After several discussions, the leadership agreed that it was important to take advantage of this hunger and provide a unique opportunity for teaching and preaching that would meet the needs of the congregation.

I conducted an initial survey (Appendix 1) during the beginning of a morning worship service. The survey included questions covering a wide range of issues related to Old Testament narratives. As noted, part A of the survey dealt with variables such as age, education, and the number of years a person had been saved. Part B included questions that dealt with general knowledge regarding people or events of Old Testament narratives. It also included questions that had decisively more theological overtones, such as basic hermeneutical principles and the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture. Part C contained ten short-answer questions to gauge the congregation’s overall knowledge of the book of Esther.

The synthesis of the initial survey substantiated the need of the congregants of Hope Fellowship to better understand the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for their life. It further provided the foundation for the strategy upon which I implemented this project to meet that need.

The Genre of Old Testament Narrative

While 72 percent of those polled indicated that they understood what is meant by the term “narrative” as applied to biblical stories of the Old Testament, 38 percent of respondents indicated that they regularly have a hard time knowing when one story ends and another starts. Except for specific well-known stories, such as David and Goliath, the events of the Old Testament often seem to run together for these respondents.

These and other results confirm that while a majority of the group had a general understanding of what constitutes a biblical narrative almost half of the

congregation was unable to fully interact with the biblical text simply because they did not understand the mechanics of narrative genre. This shortcoming in turn created a barrier to understanding how and why Old Testament narrative is important and relevant to many of the respondents.

The Importance and Relevance of Old Testament Narrative

While 52 percent of respondents believed that Old Testament narratives are relevant for today, 35 percent believed that the New Testament is more relevant than the Old Testament. Another 21 percent indicated that they were unsure if the Old Testament was relevant to the Christian. The majority, 79 percent, indicated that they believed that all Old Testament narratives must ultimately be understood in the light of the cross of Christ, but 24 percent believed that the reader was to some degree the one who determines the meaning of the biblical text.

These results highlight the congregation's pre-project confusion regarding the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. While asserting that the meaning of Hebrew narratives is ultimately found in the cross of Christ, most people were unable to explain how they would derive meaning or how it applied to them. For a large portion of the congregation, meaning is to some degree subjective—how I want to apply it to the cross. Forty-one percent of people were not even sure if the historical context of a narrative was important in deriving the meaning.

Theology in Narrative

The initial survey also showed that only 59 percent of respondents believed that Old Testament narratives are theological in nature. The remainder either disagreed or was unsure. While, as noted, 79 percent of respondents believed that all Old Testament narratives must ultimately be understood in the light of the cross of Christ, 52 percent were unsure how Jesus is portrayed or referenced outside of specific prophecies. Further, only 65 percent believed that narratives were to be interpreted in a God-centered

manner. Thirty-nine percent believed that narratives are anthropocentric in nature.

These statistics highlight the congregation's pre-project lack of understanding regarding the eternal plan of redemption in Christ prefigured in the Old Testament and the radical God-centeredness of Scripture. While the majority asserted that the meaning of Hebrew narratives is ultimately found in the cross of Christ, 48 percent believed that *the* purpose of narratives is simply to give examples of faith to emulate, such as David before Goliath. For many, then, meaning is anthropocentric in nature.

The Narrative of Esther

In the initial study 45 percent of respondents indicated that they had read the narrative of Esther at some time during their Christian lives. However, 86 percent of respondents, including the vast majority of those who claimed to have read the book of Esther, were not aware that God is not named in the narrative. Of those who had read the book, only 29 percent were able to answer basic questions about the story. While they remembered that Esther was a Jewish girl who became queen, they were unable to recall other basic aspects such as Haman being the enemy; that he wanted to kill the Jews; or even whether God saved the Jews. The initial survey, then, confirmed that the book of Esther would be an excellent narrative for this project.

Establishing and Implementing the Infrastructure

After analyzing the information from the initial survey (Appendix 1), the next step was to confirm a strategy for the project. As the purpose of this project is to preach expositively through the book of Esther so that the congregants of Hope Fellowship grow to understand the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative in their lives, Chapter 1 established three primary goals to meet this objective. The first goal was to lead the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church to understand the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for Christians living in the twenty-first century. The second goal was to continue grounding the church in solid doctrine. The third goal

was to sharpen my preaching skills to be a better communicator of God's truth.

In order to meet these goals effectively, the project's infrastructure consisted of three key components. The first component was an expository sermon series through the book of Esther, followed up by corresponding sermon evaluations. The second component was the integration of the church's cell group ministry, known as Berean Heart Groups, in which people discussed specific questions of application from the sermons. The third component was a series of Sunday school classes that dealt with the nature and character of Hebrew narrative and interpretational approaches to finding Christ-centered significance.

Preaching through Esther Expositorily

The key component of the project was to preach expositorily through an Old Testament narrative, the story of Esther, as it met all three goals of the project. First, preaching would demonstrate the importance and relevance of the narrative for the spiritual lives of God's people in the twenty-first century by explaining the text and making direct application for the congregation. Second, preaching would provide the opportunity to further ground the congregation in their understanding of both systematic and biblical theology. Third, the sermon evaluations associated with the preaching series would provide valuable feedback for becoming a better communicator of God's truth.

The narrative of Esther is one of the great accounts of God's salvation in the Old Testament. Since the initial survey confirmed that most of the congregants were unfamiliar with the book of Esther, it was ideal for this project. Not only would it provide an exciting narrative to explore God's salvation in redemptive history and help to develop interpretational skills for understanding and applying spiritual truth today, but it would supply ample opportunities to explore the structure and characteristics of Hebrew narrative, such as reversals and irony. The book of Esther would also provide a unique challenge to preach Old Testament narrative Christocentrically, making it important and relevant for the church today.

I divided the sermon series on the book of Esther into ten messages, each following as closely as possible the natural literary divisions of the narrative. This process allowed me to preach the narrative in its entirety, one segment per sermon per week for ten weeks. I designed each sermon to reinforce a responsible Christocentric methodology for interpretation and application while at the same time highlighting key developments in the narrative's structure and plot.

The sermons. I preached the first sermon, entitled "Beginnings" (Appendix 3), on September 12, 2010 and I designed it specifically as an introduction to the book of Esther. Instead of being based on one primary text, the sermon used several key texts to outline the overall plot of the narrative. At the same time, the sermon introduced the listeners to such key aspects of narratives as the setting, historical context, and major characters. The sermon used a combination of redemptive-historical progression and longitudinal themes, specifically the themes of covenant and providence, to situate the book of Esther in God's plan of redemption, with Christ ushering in the new covenant. The sermon challenged listeners to obedience and faithfulness in response to God's unmerited covenantal love, especially when God appears distant or uninvolved in their lives.

I delivered the second sermon, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms" (Appendix 4), based on Esther 1 on September 19, 2010. The sermon highlighted the literary element of the setting of the narrative, while demonstrating how contrast, typology, and analogy brought out the meaning of the text. God's invisible Kingdom stands in stark contrast to the description of opulence and the human power of Ahasuerus' kingdom. As king, the capricious Ahasuerus also provides a sharp contrast to Christ's righteous rule. Christians must realize that there is an ongoing battle waging between these two kingdoms; one visible, earthly, and sensual, the other invisible, spiritual and eternal.

I delivered the third sermon, "Persian Idol" (Appendix 5) based on Esther 2, on September 26, 2010. The sermon discussed the major literary element of character development in the protagonists of Mordecai and Esther, while analogy was the principle

means of interpretation. The royal beauty contest and Esther's rise to queen provide an example of how easy it is for Christians to fall prey to the seduction of this world and compromise their faith.

The fourth sermon, "The Spirit of Haman" (Appendix 6), I preached on October 3, 2010. It highlighted the literary aspects of plot development, tension, foreshadowing, and characterization in Hebrew narrative. The features of longitudinal themes, typology, and analogy provided the basis for interpreting Haman's desire and plot to kill the Jews. In learning to live in an ungodly world, believers need to remember that Satan, the ruler of this world, desires to be worshipped and that there is a "spirit of Haman" at work in the world; a spirit of self-righteousness, hatred, and revenge. Ungodliness can and will arise against God's people, sometimes with little or no provocation. Yet believers do not serve a capricious king who allows injustice to be perpetrated against them. God, through Christ, has brought them into a covenant relationship and there His covenantal love and providence will prevail.

I preached the fifth message, entitled "Making a Stand" (Appendix 7), on October 17, 2010. The sermon focused on Esther 4 and the chief literary aspects of Hebrew narrative highlighted were plot and character development. The ways of longitudinal themes, promise-fulfillment, typology, and analogy were the means of discussing and interpreting Esther's decision to risk her life and intercede on behalf of the Jews before the king. Christ obediently committed Himself to intercede for the elect when they were under the curse of the law (Rom 8:2) and because of this truth a Christian's identity with God is never to be left in question. God's covenantal promise to aid and deliver His people from death is now fulfilled in Christ and His identification and sacrifice demands that the believer identify with Him by consciously walking in conformity to His revealed will on a daily basis. This commitment is especially true in the defining moments that will arise in every Christian's life, when a believer will have to

make a stand and believe, that in the providence of God, they have been raised up for such a challenge or opportunity.

I delivered the sixth sermon, entitled “Setting the Trap” (Appendix 8), on October 24, 2010. The sermon focused on Esther 5 and highlighted the literary aspect of plot development, specifically conflict leading to climax. I employed the ways of typology, longitudinal themes, contrast, promise-fulfillment, redemptive-historical progression, and analogy in order to help people understand why Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a second feast instead of seeking the salvation of the Jews when she had the opportunity at the first feast. While believers are members of God’s invisible Kingdom, they need to remember that worldly kingdoms and principalities wield real power and that it may sometimes be wiser and more in keeping with God’s design to take a less direct and confrontational route in dealing with people who are antagonistic. Like Esther, believers need to wait on God, seize divine opportunities when they are presented, and trust that God is in control of all things.

I delivered the seventh sermon, entitled “Poetic Justice” (Appendix 9), on October 31, 2010, and highlighted the role of peripety, reversals, chiasm, irony and divine confluence, or coming together, in Old Testament narratives. Typology, contrast, and analogy helped bring forth the spiritual meaning of this the pivotal chapter of the narrative. Believers need to rest assured in the truth that God is sovereignly working through human agency as well as through common everyday occurrences in order to bring about His will. What may appear a series of seemingly inconsequential and unrelated events is really the invisible hand of God providentially and inexorably guiding all things according to His will.

I preached the eighth sermon, “What a Difference a Day Makes!” (Appendix 10), on November 7, 2010 and based it on Esther 7. The sermon highlighted the literary features of reversals and climax, and used contrast, typology, and longitudinal themes to derive the meaning and application of the text. More often than not, God does not fulfill

His promises through the miraculous, but rather provides that fulfillment through everyday events, which are nonetheless guided sovereignly by His providential hand. Believers must remember that God's sovereign plan includes human agency, so they must learn to walk in obedience to what they believe is God's revealed will for them. Christians have a real role to play in the outworking of God's will.

I preached the ninth sermon, "The Eye of the Storm" (Appendix 11) on November 14, 2010, basing it on Esther 8. The sermon highlighted the literary devices of irony and reversals and I employed by way of analogy, longitudinal themes, redemptive-historical progression, typology, promise-fulfillment, and contrast to explain the meaning of the text. Even though believers may feel that God is uninvolved and distant in their life, they can be assured that His covenant faithfulness is at work to bring to fruition the final end, their salvation. God keeps His promises.

I preached the last sermon, "Salvation at Last" (Appendix 12) on November 21, based on Esther 9 and 10. The key literary elements discussed were reversals and denouement. I used typology, contrast, analogy, redemptive-historical progression, and longitudinal themes to highlight the meaning of the text. The Christian must learn to rest assured in God's covenantal faithfulness. The establishment of Purim reminds us that once believers have become an object of God's particular love, they are called to live for His glory. Their assurance is grounded in the truth that Jesus is forevermore interceding on behalf of all believers, guiding and caring for them.

Sermon evaluations. At the beginning of the project, on Wednesday August 22, 2010, I formed a sermon evaluation team and trained them to use a standardized Sermon Evaluation Form (Appendix 13). The team consisted of 2 men and 5 women, of varying degrees of spiritual maturity. Every week these individuals evaluated the sermon in order to give constructive feedback on how well the sermon communicated the key ideas of the text and applied them to the lives of the congregation.

I divided the Sermon Evaluation Form (Appendix 13) into three sections. The

first section focused on sermon delivery and asked questions pertaining to the appearance, mannerisms, voice, and eye contact of the preacher. The second section focused on the content of the message and asked the following seven key questions. Was the introduction engaging and did it clearly set the direction and tone of the sermon? Were the sermon's points derived from the text? Did the preacher use descriptive illustrations that emphasized the sermon's points? Was the meaning of the text made relevant for the listeners? Were good bridges made between the ancient text and the modern world? Was the conclusion engaging and thought provoking? Was the sermon's overall impact memorable? The third section focused on genre and asked the following questions. Was the setting adequately explained? Was the plot explained and followed? Were the characters developed? Did the listener have a better understanding of the meaning of the narrative after the sermon? Was the narrative meaningful and relevant?

In the first two sections the evaluators graded the sermon on a scale of 1 to 5; 1 being very poor, 3 being average, and 5 being outstanding. In the third section, evaluators were simply to mark yes, no or uncertain according to each question.

After each Sunday morning service, I collected the evaluation forms and a short debriefing time ensued with the evaluators. These times were particularly helpful for learning whether the sermon resonated with the hearers. Responses varied, but all of the evaluators were encouraging at times and critical on occasions.

Heart Groups

Two years ago the leadership of Hope Fellowship deliberately modeled the small group ministry at Hope Fellowship, known as Berean Heart Groups, on Larry Osborne's Sticky Church.¹ During the duration of the expository sermon component of

¹Osborne's Sticky Church is a church growth program designed to integrate people into sermon-based small groups where intimacy, transparency, and a direct application of biblical truth derived from the sermon fosters togetherness.

the project, three Berean Heart Groups met once a week in the evenings to discuss the corresponding weekly sermon. The purpose of these groups was to provide an intimate setting where people could review the sermon and be guided in a more personal application, thus making it relevant to their lives. Prepared questions taken directly from the sermon guided the discussion and helped participants make direct spiritual applications. The groups always met on Sunday and the following Monday and Wednesday, always in the evening.

The sermon-based small group discussion format had several key benefits that encouraged the growth of interpretation and application skills. The first was that the congregation had to be attentive during the sermon because they knew that the points of application in the sermon would be the basis for questions and discussion at the Berean Heart Group. Secondly, the questions helped to guide a proper understanding and application of the text by highlighting important literary and theological issues in the text. Therefore, instead of allowing the group to handle the biblical text serendipitously based on how each person individually felt they could apply them, the questions guided the Berean Heart Groups on the basis of sermon research and preparation. This guiding of interpretation and application helped to provide people with the building blocks necessary for study and spiritual growth.

Since the sermon-based format of the Berean Heart Groups had been functioning for several years in the church prior to the project, trained, mature Christian men were already in places of leadership for each of the three small groups that functioned throughout the week. At the beginning of the project approximately 42 percent of the church membership was already participating in one of the three small groups. Each week I prepared questions and sent out by email to the group leaders before the Sunday morning service. Receiving the questions early allowed the leaders to familiarize themselves with the questions, which in turn helped them better listen during the sermon. After the worship time was over, the group leaders asked any personal questions they had

in order to minimize any misunderstanding or misdirection. At the end of each week, having already met with their small groups, informal personal meetings with the group leaders provided follow-up to make sure that there were no unresolved issues or problems in a group. Over the term of the project, these small groups became very animated as people could start to see the interplay between the narrative and a responsible means of Christocentric interpretation.

Sunday School Lessons

The last key component of the project was an interactive teaching time during the adult Sunday school hour. The creation of opportunities for people to ask questions while learning about the character of Old Testament narrative was important for the development of interpretive skills. The development of these skills related directly to a believer's ability to find meaning and significance in the Old Testament for their life today. The purpose of these teaching times was twofold: (1) to provide a framework for understanding the structure and use of Old Testament narratives, (2) to present a responsible Christocentric methodology for interpreting them.

I designed the classes not only to share information, but also to create an atmosphere where people were encouraged to interact. Discussion centered on how to interpret Old Testament narratives rightly in the light of the cross of Christ, with specific reference to the book of Esther. In all, I conducted four Sunday school classes. The first two classes dealt with the nature and character of Old Testament narrative, while classes three and four outlined a responsible, contemporary methodology for preaching Christ from the Old Testament, following Sidney Greidanus' *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament*. By designing the class this way, congregants not only gained vital interpretative tools for later use, but they were better able to follow how the weekly sermons derived Christ-centered meaning from the text. For example, having discussed the way of longitudinal themes in Sunday school, congregants more readily grasped the importance of such themes as the law and God's covenantal love.

The first lesson, “Understanding Hebrew Narratives,” I taught over two weeks. On Sunday August 29, 2010 the participants reviewed the major elements of narrative, such as scene, characterization, dialogue, setting, and plot. They also learned seven key guidelines for interpreting a narrative. On Sunday, September 5, 2010 the participants had the chance to interact with narrative stylistic devices such as repetition, inclusions, chiasm, and irony and learned how to follow Sidney Greidanus’ diagram of Hebrew plot development.²

The second lesson, “Seven Pathways to Legitimately Seeking Christ in Old Testament Narratives,” I also taught over two weeks, on Sunday, November 28 and Sunday, December 5, 2010. As this class was part of the follow up to the sermon series, participants were able to review the narrative of Esther and see how specific aspects of sermons were derived.

Post Sermon Evaluation

At the end of project, the initial survey was again conducted in order to gauge any changes in the congregation’s understanding. On Sunday, December 5, 2010, at the beginning of the morning worship time, twenty-three members of the church retook the survey (Appendix 2). The information gathered will be discussed in chapter 5.

Summary

In an initial pre-project survey (Appendix 1) I confirmed the need of Hope Fellowship Church to grow in their ability to understand the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for their lives. To meet this need I formulated and implemented a project strategy containing three major interrelated components. The first component was an expository preaching series through the book of Esther, and included a weekly

²Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 205.

evaluation of the sermon. The second component was the incorporation of Berean Heart Groups that reflected on questions of sermon application. The third major component was the creation of Sunday school classes that dealt directly with understanding and applying Old Testament narratives. At the end of the project, I repeated the initial survey (Appendix 2). I implemented the fifteen week project between August 22, 2010 and December 5, 2010, according to Appendix 14.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT EVALUATION

The purpose of the project was to preach expositively through the book of Esther so that the congregants of Hope Fellowship of Port Lavaca, Texas grow to understand and appreciate the importance of Old Testament narrative for their spiritual lives. I initiated the project on Sunday, August 22, 2010 and concluded on Sunday, December 5, 2010. At the beginning of the project I conducted an initial survey (Appendix 1) among the congregation during the morning worship service. Thirty-one people participated, but with two voided surveys the number of true respondents was twenty-nine. This survey not only confirmed the congregation's pre-project understanding of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narratives for their spiritual lives, but also confirmed the planned strategy for implementing the project. At the end of the project, I again conducted the initial survey among the congregation at the commencement of the morning worship service (Appendix 2), with twenty-three people participating.

The evaluation that follows is a synthesis of the key data drawn from these two surveys, comparing and contrasting the congregations pre-project and post-project understanding of Old Testament narrative. A detailed summary of the results of the pre-project and post-project results are set out in Appendix 1 and 2 respectively. The results of the surveys revealed that the project was a qualified success.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

The survey conducted at the beginning and end of the project to evaluate the project's goals and the results of the project included questions covering a wide range of issues related to Old Testament narratives. Part A of the survey dealt with variables such

as age, education, and the number of years a person had been saved. Part B included questions that dealt with general knowledge regarding people or events of Old Testament narratives; basic hermeneutical principles; and the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture. Responses were requested on a sliding scale: 1 strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 uncertain, 4 agree and 5 strongly agree. Part C contained ten short-answer questions specifically related to the book of Esther and was designed to gauge the congregation's overall knowledge of that narrative.

As noted, 29 respondents participated in the initial survey. In the post-project survey (Appendix 2), 23 people participated. Since the surveys were anonymous, it is not possible to identify specifically how many of the congregants participated in both surveys. This inability is a shortcoming in the survey methodology, which should be addressed in any further surveys of this form. I will speak to this matter later in the chapter. An assessment of the congregants who were unable to participate in the second survey indicates that there were a number of circumstantial situations that developed in the church at the time of the second survey. Three families faced life-threatening illness and the husband of a fourth family was incarcerated on immigration charges. All of these families actively participated in both the sermon-based small groups known as Berean Heart Groups and Sunday school.

A comparison of the information obtained from Part A of the pre-project and post-project surveys (information related to age, sex, education and how many years a person has been a Christian) does suggest that there is a particular demographic within the congregation that remains in need of more help. This demographic will be highlighted throughout this chapter.

The first goal of the project was to assist the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church understand the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative for Christians living in the twenty-first century. The means for accomplishing this goal were through preaching expositively the book of Esther, explaining the text and making direct

application for the congregation; Berean Heart Groups, which provided an intimate setting for applying personal application; and Sunday school classes.

Analysis of the survey results indicates that this goal was partially fulfilled. In the post-project survey, the percentage of people who strongly disagreed that Old Testament narrative had little in common with life today increased from 34 percent to 61 percent, an increase of 27 percent in the number of congregants believing that Old Testament narrative was pertinent to life today. This increase is consistent with the 11 percent increase in the number of people who strongly believed that it was important to preach Old Testament narratives in the church.

The success in achieving this first goal resulted from the combination of the three key elements of the project. First, expository preaching demonstrated the importance and relevance of the narrative for the spiritual lives of God's people today by explaining the text and making direct application for the congregation. Second, the Berean Heart Groups provided an intimate forum to guide personal application of the sermon's message. The success of these small groups was due in great measure to the trained leaders who were in place prior to the project. Third, the integration of Sunday school classes provided a means for understanding the character of Old Testament narrative, as well as a responsible, contemporary methodology for preaching Christ from the Old Testament. The successful combination of these three project components is highlighted by the 19 percent increase in the number of respondents who believed that the book of Esther taught them about Jesus (55 percent pre-project as compared to 74 percent post-project). There was also a 26 percent increase in those who believed that the primary lesson of Esther is that God's people must make decisions according to faith.

While the percentages listed above indicate a significant increase in the congregation's understanding of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narratives for their lives, the percentages are far from satisfactory. Thirty percent of the congregation was still not able to fully appreciate and appropriate the spiritual truths of

Hebrew narrative by the end of the project, as they remained unsure how Old Testament narrative points to Christ other than direct references. Further, while the final survey indicated that 74 percent of respondents confidently believed that the book of Esther directed them toward Jesus, 17 percent were still unsure and 8 percent still disagreed.

While, on the one hand, these results suggest that the project was less than successful; on the other hand, they help verify the validity of the survey results. Congregants clearly attempted to answer the survey questions honestly and from their hearts. They did not respond simply to please. Indeed, had all the congregants indicated that they were convinced, the results would have been suspect. Specifically, had all the participants indicated that they agreed, it could have been argued that it was not illness and other factors that kept people from church as previously noted, but rather that those who remained unconvinced chose not to respond to the second survey or attend church that week.

Nonetheless, the failure to convince more congregants may be attributed to faults inherent in the project. Many congregants were unable to attend services consistently over the duration of the sermon series, due to the demands of shift work. Other people's presence was sporadic simply because their attendance at church is never consistent. Another inherent problem was the fact that only about 18 congregants actively participate in Berean Heart Groups weekly, a key component in making the text personally applicable. The same is true for the Sunday school classes, where the average attendance is 12. As previously noted, four of the families unable to participate in the second survey were active in both the Berean Heart Groups and Sunday school. Had those families been able to participate, the overall results may have been much more positive.

A key shortcoming in the survey methodology was that there is no way to determine how many, and which, survey respondents attended all three components of the project. In retrospect, it would have been beneficial to have structured the survey such that the results of the project could be correlated with the attendance at Berean Heart

Groups and Sunday school. Unfortunately, again because the surveys were anonymous, it is not possible to conduct this analysis retroactively. Regardless, not all congregants will ever be able to participate in a Berean Heart Group or attend Sunday school; and church attendance will always be inconsistent because of the demands of the congregant's lives. Therefore, while there was an overall measurable increase in the congregants' understanding of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative to their lives, the post-project survey demonstrated that there is still much work to be done and that for many congregants this work must be done primarily through the regular sermon schedule rather than the important supplementary activities such as Berean Heart Groups or Sunday school.

A review of the overall survey results of those congregants who remained unconvinced as to whether Old Testament narrative is important and relevant for their lives revealed that people between 41-60 years of age with high school education only represent the demographic group most in need of ongoing education.

The second goal was to continue grounding the church in solid biblical doctrine. Again, this was a qualified success. The number of people who strongly agreed that Old Testament narratives teach theology increased from 31 percent pre-project to 35 percent post project, a modest 4 percent increase. This increase, however, is in contrast to the reality that in the same question the number of people who were uncertain whether narratives were theological increased from 31 percent pre-project to 39 percent post-project.

A review of the survey results of those congregants who remained unconvinced as to whether Old Testament narratives teach theology revealed that women between 41-61 years of age with either a high school education or some college represent the demographic group most in need of ongoing teaching. This demographic is largely similar to those who were unsure whether Old Testament narratives were important and relevant for their lives and may provide a further basis to assist in focusing future work.

I designed the project to combine the elements of expository preaching, Berean Heart Groups, and Sunday school classes to foster ongoing theological reflection and growth. While expository preaching highlighted and explained the importance of key theological issues in the text, the format of the Berean Heart Groups allowed for further explanation and application as needed. The Sunday school classes helped congregants to be Christ-centered in their interpretation of Scripture.

The questions of the survey that dealt with theological issues attempted to probe the respondents understanding regarding three main topics. The first of these topics was in regards to the veracity of Scripture. In this area there was a marked increase in the respondents who indicated that narratives describe real events and were thus historically accurate. The initial survey indicated that only 34 percent strongly believed in the historicity of narrative events, while the post-project results indicate that number had climbed to 70 percent, a 36 percent increase. In regard to the book of Esther, the number of respondents who believed strongly that Esther, Mordecai, and Haman were real people, increased from 48 percent pre-project to 83 percent post-project, again a 35 percent increase. By the end of the project only 4 percent of the congregation remained unconvinced.

A review of the survey results of those congregants who remained unconvinced as to whether Mordecai, Esther, and Haman were real people revealed that people 51-60 years of age with a high school education represent the demographic group most in need of ongoing teaching. This demographic is almost the same as those who were unsure if Old Testament narratives taught theology and those who unsure whether Old Testament narratives were important and relevant for their lives.

The second theological topic was the God-centeredness of Scripture. In response to the question whether all Old Testament narratives should be understood in the light of Jesus Christ and the New Testament, the number of respondents who agreed increased from 79 percent pre-project to 82 percent post-project and those who strongly

agreed increased from 38 percent pre-project to 52 percent post-project. At the same time, the number of respondents who believed that the primary references to Jesus in the Old Testament were in the form of specific prophecies also saw change. Prior to the project, 28 percent of people believed that references to Christ were in the form of specific Messianic prophecies, while post-project that number increased to 35percent. This increase, while the opposite of what would be expected after the project, demonstrates that some people have moved away from being uncertain, believing that Jesus is indeed referenced in the Old Testament. The number of people who strongly agreed that narratives should be understood in light of the cross increased from 38 percent pre-project to 52 percent post-project. At the same time, the percentage that were uncertain whether narratives should be understood in light of the cross of Christ fell from 21 percent pre-project to 17 percent post-project. In addition, the number of people who strongly disagreed that Old Testament narratives are man-centered increased from 31 percent pre-project to 48 percent post-project.

These statistics indicate that the congregation as a whole has grown in their understanding that Jesus Christ is at the heart of every Old Testament book. Preaching through the book of Esther has helped to demonstrate this truth. An analysis of those who remained convinced that Jesus is primarily found only in specific Old Testament prophecies reveals people between the ages of 41-60 with 6+ years in Christ are in most need of ongoing teaching. While this group of respondents has the widest degree of variance, it roughly corresponds to those previously noted.

The third topic was the hermeneutical basis for interpreting and applying Scripture. As a result of the project, the number of people who disagreed that the reader determines the meaning of Scripture increased from 51 percent to 83 percent post-project, a 32 percent increase. At the same time, those who were uncertain fell from 24 percent pre-project to 9 percent post-project and the number who disagreed also fell, from 24

percent to 9 percent. This data means that while 31 percent of congregants had gained a better understanding of the basis for interpreting and applying Scripture.

A review of the survey results of those congregants who believed that the reader determines the meaning of the text revealed that people 41-61 years of age, with a high school education or some college who have been saved for between 6-15 years represent the demographic group most in need of ongoing education. Again, this demographic is very similar to those previously noted.

The preceding results are further supported by the results of questions related to the book of Esther. Those who strongly disagreed that the historical setting of the book is of little importance in understanding the text increased from 10 percent pre-project to 39 percent post-project. The total number of congregants who disagreed increased from 48 percent to 78 percent, an increase of 30 percent. Some 9 percent remained uncertain or continued to feel that the historical setting was unimportant.

While the combined data indicates that there was a measurable increase in the congregation's understanding of doctrine, there is still much that needs to be done. Even at the end of the project 17 percent remained uncertain as to whether Old Testament narratives should be understood in the light of Jesus and the cross; 39 percent remained uncertain whether narratives taught theology; and 9 percent still believed that the reader determines the meaning of Scripture. For these reasons, the second goal of the project was not completely successful. The above results may be attributed, as in the first goal of the project, to faults inherent in each of the three major components of the project: inconsistent attendance at church service, and low participation in the adult Sunday school hour and Berean Heart groups. These results do not appear to be attributable to the makeup of either the small groups or the Sunday school classes, as there was a homogeneous mix of men and women attendees at both.

The above data related to the second goal of the project indicates that there is a reoccurring demographic in need for continued theological education among the

congregation. This demographic group is characterized generally as people between the ages of 41-60 years of age with either a high school education or some college training. Understanding the needs of this demographic will help in the development of future teaching and preaching efforts from the Old Testament.

The third goal of the project was to sharpen my expository preaching skills so that I could be a better communicator of God's truth and continue to lead the congregation more effectively. The project helped to sharpen these skills through the establishment of its three key components. First, the expository preaching series on the book of Esther dictated that I understand the character and flow of the narrative; interact with its literary devices such as irony, reversals and chiasm; as well as consistently apply a Christ-centered hermeneutic to the text. Second, teaching the Sunday school classes meant that I had to be fully conversant with not only the character of Hebrew narratives, but also interpretational methodologies. Third, by preparing the discussion questions for the Berean Heart groups, I had to practice bringing the application of the text down to a personal level.

A sermon evaluation team assessed each sermon according to a standardized Sermon Evaluation Form (Appendix 12), which was handed in each week. Their task was to give constructive feedback on how well the sermon communicated the key ideas of the text and applied them to the lives of the congregation. Again, the achievement of this goal was a qualified success. The results of the Sermon Evaluation Form are included in Appendix 13.

The overall evaluations were very positive. For message content, including expository merit and relevancy, scores of good and outstanding were the norm. For sermon delivery, scores were consistently average to good. This is undoubtedly my greatest need for growth. In terms of genre, response was overwhelming positive. The evaluators believed that the narrative was consistently well explained and made meaningful for them.

Throughout the sermon series the sermon evaluation team was very

encouraging. Only once was my teaching challenged and that was by someone who knew a lot more about the subject of fasting than I did. The areas that the team highlighted as consistent strengths were the expository merit of the sermons and the sermons' introduction. Several times evaluators, as well as congregants, came and expressed their gratitude for learning how literary devices such as reversals and irony, play such an important role in understanding the meaning and flow of the narrative. One evaluator indicated that she was consistently "overwhelmed and comforted" by the theological truth of the narrative that God was sovereign.

Two areas provided a regular challenge during the sermon series. The first was making appropriate application that bridged the ancient text and the modern world. The second was finding consistently good illustrations. While the team indicated that both were well done, more illustrations would have helped to flesh out some of the more complex ideas.

The expository sermon series on the narrative of Esther significantly honed my skills as a preacher of God's Word, as each week I had to study and then apply the importance and relevance of the text to the congregation. An issue that made the attainment of this goal a less than complete success was inconsistent input of constructive criticism. Consistently, there was a reticence on the part of the team to provide adequate criticism and while every pastor likes to believe they are being truly effective, we all know we can improve. The survey evaluations were dutifully filled out and handed in, but too often the evaluations were devoid of helpful suggestions. The team response to my repeated encouragement to be critical was that they did not believe that they were qualified to critique or comment on the sermon. More specific leading questions would have helped eliminate this problem. After a few weeks of receiving evaluations lacking extra comments, I initiated a process of informal debriefing with the evaluators as they handed in the evaluation forms. During this time I wrote down their questions or concerns on the back of their evaluations.

As noted, the achievement of this goal was less successful than I would have liked because I feel that I was unable to achieve as much feedback as I desired. While one sermon series can hone specific skills, preaching of Christ from the Old Testament is a lifelong education. This truth is especially true in the area of applying the text in a relevant way to Christians living in the modern world.

An Overall Evaluation of the Project

The purpose of this project was to assist the congregants of Hope Fellowship Church to gain a better understanding of the importance and relevance of Old Testament narrative by preaching expositively through one of the those narratives, the book of Esther. A comparison of the pre-project and post-project surveys revealed that the congregation did indeed grow in their understanding that Old Testament narrative as important and relevant; and, that the project helped to ground the church in solid biblical doctrine. The project also sharpened my expository preaching skills so that I could be a better communicator of God's Word. The preceding evaluation of the project's goals revealed several strengths and weaknesses that will now be reviewed.

The Project's Strengths

The greatest strength of the project was the use of sermons, sermon-based small groups called Berean Heart Groups, and Sunday school. While the nature of the survey does not allow a complete confirmation of the importance of this threefold approach, I feel confident that collectively this approach accounts for the positive results achieved. Expository preaching demonstrated the importance and relevance of the narrative for the spiritual lives of the congregants by explaining the text and making direct application for them. The Berean Heart Groups focused on specific questions of application derived from the sermons, thus encouraging people to make direct personal application. The Sunday school classes dealt with the nature and character of Hebrew narrative and with interpretational approaches to finding Christ-centered significance.

The three interrelated constituent components worked together as a potent combination. While the sermon expounded the meaning of the text, congregants learned to anticipate the literary and Christological connections in the text from the Sunday school lessons and learned to apply the meaning directly to their lives in the Berean Heart Groups. While each component had a specific purpose, the combined effect was greater than their sum. This interconnected approach provides a concrete example to follow in all of my future preaching.

A second strength of the project was the use of the book of Esther. Since few congregants had read this book prior to the project (and even fewer recognized its implications) and since it is the only book of the Bible that does not explicitly reference God; it provided a unique challenge for preaching a God-centered Christological approach and a clear test of my ability to carry God's message. The book not only provided an exciting narrative of God's providential care in which to explore Christ's work of salvation, but its purposeful literary structure and sometimes exaggerated use of literary devices supplied numerous opportunities to focus on the character of Hebrew narrative. The narrative also gave the opportunity to reveal the outworking of theology in everyday life situations, making it a unique vehicle for personal growth. At the same time, great spiritual truths like the sovereignty of God and His unfailing covenantal love toward Esther and the Jews gave theology a context that was in some ways easier to apply to modern life than the epistles of the New Testament.

The project spurred a hunger within the congregation to grow in their understanding of Old Testament narratives and by the end of the project there was a modest 9 percent increase, from 38 percent pre-project to 47 percent post-project, in people who wanted to read the Old Testament on a regular basis.

The Project's Weaknesses

Along with the strengths of the project, the implementation stage revealed several weaknesses. One of the key weaknesses or challenges of the project, which

restricted the successful implementation of the project, was the size of the congregation and the work reality of many members. Hope Fellowship Church has a membership of 52, with weekly attendance of 30-60. Many of the congregants work shift work at local factories, thus making their weekly attendance sporadic. This inconsistency also meant that Sunday school attendance varied, as did participation in the Berean Heart Groups. The end result was that some people were not able to take full advantage of the integrated nature of the project's constituent components. The small size of the congregation and the inconsistency of attendance also meant that the number of people who were available to participate in a sermon evaluation team was limited.

A second weakness of the project was that the project's success or lack thereof was determined almost solely on the data supplied by the pre-project and post-project surveys. Instead of being able to measure success as seeing more people involved in a specific ministry, success was determined by a numerical analysis of survey results, which may or may not have reflected the true understanding of the respondents. Personal theological growth is a life-long process. Spiritual truths are like bricks being placed one on top of the other to form a wall; often mature spiritual insight only arises after the wall is partially erected. In the end, it is the Holy Spirit who reveals, teaches, and grounds believers in all spiritual truth; the pastor is only a tool. Over the months and years to come, it is the church's prayer that God will use the truths revealed as a result of this project to spur men on to ministry. As a follow-up to this project, two men will be approached about co-leading an expository Bible study in the book of Leviticus in the hope of training them to be better communicators of God's Word. Equally importantly, a new Berean Heart Group has already been started and includes three women who fit the demographic in greatest need of teaching.

Since the success of the project had to be measured in large part by survey results, the survey design was extremely important. In this regard, as the results of the surveys were analyzed, it became apparent that there were design flaws that hampered

analysis. If this exercise were to be repeated, it would be beneficial to make a number of modifications including: the ability to correlate participation in Berean Heart Groups and Sunday school class attendance with post-project survey results; and the ability to better track individual responses (while maintaining anonymity) to allow pre-project survey results from congregants who did not participate in the second survey to be discounted from the initial survey (to minimize any resulting bias).

A third weakness of the project was the sheer amount of new information to which the congregants were exposed. Learning in the context of the book of Esther greatly facilitated the educational process, but the time needed to adequately unpack and apply all the spiritual truths was more than the project allowed. This limitation is especially true with the Sunday school classes that focused on a responsible, contemporary methodology for preaching Christ from the Old Testament. The understanding and practice of such ideas may take years for the average congregant and needs to be reinforced time after time.

Reflections

In overview, the post-project surveys and sermon evaluations revealed that pastor and congregation alike grew in their appreciation of Old Testament narratives. The congregation appeared to genuinely appreciate the study on Esther and has asked for a similar study in the book of Ruth. One of the great lessons of this project was to see that people seem to learn best in context of real life situations, something that narrative does well. Several people said that they learned more during the sermon series on Esther than in their whole Christian life. While undoubtedly hyperbole, their zeal was real.

The depth of the spiritual truths touched on in this project, along with the church leadership's commitment to covenant theology, demands that Hebrew narrative become a staple in the church's sermonic diet. At the same time, there is a great need to train men specifically in the proper exposition of the Old Testament. As a church, Hope Fellowship needs to be proactive in mentoring men to teach and preach Christ from the Old Testament.

One of the original secondary components of the project was a celebratory

reenactment of the book of Esther during Purim. I originally designed the project to be implemented through the months of February, March, and April, thus allowing the church to invite a Messianic Jewish pastor to lead the congregation in a traditional reading of Esther. Due to several major issues in the church, however, I postponed the project and the window of opportunity to celebrate Purim as part of the project passed. Despite this turn of events, there are plans to celebrate Purim in the future. As a post-project follow-up, a traditional reading of the book of Esther at Purim will reinforce lessons already learned and encourage new members to read Old Testament narratives.

Conclusions

Preaching expositively through the book of Esther created an increased appreciation in the congregation's understanding of how and why Old Testament narrative is important and relevant for their spiritual life. It has also greatly shaped my preaching skills.

Over the past few years a growing desire in the congregation to better understand the Old Testament created a wonderful opportunity to preach the importance and relevance of Hebrew narrative. The congregation was able to distill the spiritual truths of the book of Esther in its real-life setting and then personally apply it to their own lives. The church benefited greatly by having not only the book explained, but by personal application in sermon-based small groups. This has been especially important over the past few months as several families are being forced to deal with the spiritual, emotional, physical, and economic hardships resulting from cancer. The spiritual truths they have learned through this project are now being put directly into use.

The church has also benefited by having a model of consistent, responsible, Christ-centered interpretation of the Old Testament presented to them. This example, along with specific classes on Hebrew narrative, will provide a solid basis for future biblical theology and praxis. Future teaching and preaching can target those who are still unsure about the importance and relevance of the Old Testament to their lives. A specific

outreach to draw more women to attend Berean Heart Groups and Sunday school will be pursued, as will the creation of a women's Bible study group.

Preaching the book of Esther also provided a unique challenge for me to grow as a preacher of God's Word. Along with becoming more Christ-centered in my interpretation of the Old Testament, I have grown in my application of Scripture. In the past, my presentation of God's Word has sometimes been criticized as too theological for a blue-collar community. The book of Esther has helped me become more "down-to-earth" by studying and applying spiritual truths in real life situations.

It is my hope that the benefits of this project will have far reaching consequences in the spiritual lives of all those who attend at Hope Fellowship Church. I know that it has greatly shaped me. It is also my desire that others who read this project will benefit from it, both its strengths and weaknesses. The methodology presented herein can be duplicated in other places and the evidence for the importance and relevance of Old Testament narratives for the lives of people today will provide ideas for other preachers to include narrative into the regular diet of their church.

APPENDIX 1
PRE- PROJECT SURVEY

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to evaluate the level of understanding as we begin this project. This research is being conducted by Kevin Houser for the purposes of his D. Min. studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in expository preaching. In this research, you will be asked to fill in the following survey at the beginning and at the end of the project. Any information you provide will be *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name be identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of this survey below, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Thirty-one people participated, but 2 voided forms means that there were 29 acceptable respondents. Of note, since some of the respondents did not answer every question, some numbers do not add up to 29.

Values indicate # of respondents and the rounded percentage representing the group.

General information

The first section of this survey focuses on the basic demographics of participants.

1. How many years has it been since you came to faith in Christ? (+1 no answer)

1 year or less	_(0)_	2-5 years	_(6, 21%)_	6-10 years	_(2, 7%)_
11-15 years	_(8, 28%)_	16-20 years	_(0)_	21+ years	_(13, 45%)_

2. My highest level of education is: (+2 middle schoolers)

(6, 21%) I have some high school	_(8, 28%)_ I finished high school
(12, 41%) I have some college	_(1, 3%)_ I have a bachelor's degree
(0) I have some graduate work	_(2, 7%)_ I have a graduate degree

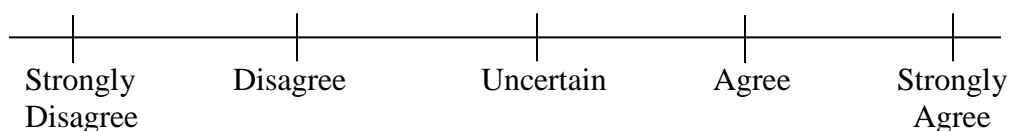
3. How old are you?

(5, 17%) Less than 20	_(1, 3%)_ 20-30
(2, 7%) 31-40	_(6, 21%)_ 41-50
(10, 34%) 51-60	_(5, 17%)_ 61+

4. Indicate your sex: Female_(18, 62%)_ Male _(13, 38%)_

Old Testament Narrative

These questions will provide information on your understanding of the place of narratives or stories in the Old Testament. Please indicate the number that best represents your understanding.



1. I understand what is meant by the term “narrative” as applied to biblical stories of the Old Testament.

(0)	(1, 3%)	(7, 24%)	(16, 55%)	(5, 17%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

2. I believe that narratives describe real events in history.

(1, 3%)	(0)	(4, 14%)	(14, 48%)	(10, 34%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

3. The primary purpose of narratives is to provide an historical account of the Jewish people.

(3, 10%)	(5, 17%)	(11, 38%)	(6, 21%)	(4, 14%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

4. The primary, if not sole, purpose of Old Testament narratives is to provide a backdrop to the New Testament.
 (3, 10%) (2, 7%) (6, 21%) (14, 48%) (4, 14%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
5. I believe that with a few notable exceptions, like the story of Abraham and Isaac, Old Testament narratives do not teach theology.
 (9, 31%) (8, 28%) (9, 31%) (0) (1, 3%)
 Strongly Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
 Disagree
- Two respondents (7%) chose not to answer question 5.
6. I believe that the New Testament is more relevant than the Old Testament for modern Christians.
 (5, 17%) (7, 24%) (6, 21%) (8, 28%) (2, 7%)
 Strongly Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
 Disagree
- One respondent (3%) chose not to answer question 6.
7. Narratives are the most common genre or type of literature in the Old Testament.
 (0) (1, 3%) (14, 48%) (11, 40%) (1, 3%)
 Strongly Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
 Disagree
- Two respondents (7%) chose not to answer question 7.
8. For Christians living in the twenty-first century, the New Testament is more relevant than the Old Testament.
 (7, 24%) (8, 28%) (4, 14%) (6, 21%) (2, 7%)
 Strongly Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
 Disagree
- Two respondents (7%) chose not to answer question 8.
9. Our primary, if not sole, focus at church should be on the New Testament.
 (15, 52%) (9, 31%) (2, 7%) (3, 10%) (0)
 Strongly Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
 Disagree
10. I believe that the story of Esther is real and that Esther, Mordecai, and Haman were real people.
 (0) (0) (2, 7%) (13, 45%) (14, 48%)
 Strongly Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
 Disagree
11. There is a real connection between the life and times of Esther and the modern world we live in.
 (1, 3%) (0) (8, 28%) (15, 52%) (5, 17%)
 Strongly Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
 Disagree

12. Except for specific detailed stories, such as David and Goliath, the events of the Old Testament seem to run together. I have a hard time knowing when one story ends and another starts.

(4, 14%)	(14, 48%)	(6, 21%)	(5, 17%)	(0)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

13. The book of Esther teaches us about Jesus Christ.

(0)	(1, 3%)	(11, 38%)	(14, 48%)	(2, 7%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

One respondent (3%) chose not to answer question 13.

14. I believe that Jonah was swallowed by a real fish.

(0)	(1, 3%)	(2, 7%)	(16, 55%)	(10, 34%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

15. It is not important to preach the narratives of the Old Testament.

(17, 59%)	(7, 24%)	(2, 7%)	(2, 7%)	(1, 3%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

16. All Old Testament narratives should be understood in the light of Jesus Christ and the New Testament.

(0)	(0)	(6, 21%)	(12, 41%)	(11, 38%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

17. The primary references to Christ in the Old Testament are in the form of specific prophecies.

(0)	(5, 17%)	(15, 52%)	(6, 21%)	(2, 7%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

One respondent (3%) chose not to answer question 17.

18. I believe that the reader determines the meaning of a biblical text.

(10, 34%)	(5, 17%)	(7, 24%)	(7, 24%)	(0)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

19. Old Testament narratives are primarily man-centered, that is, they are only a history of God's people.

(9, 31%)	(10, 34%)	(7, 24%)	(2, 7%)	(1, 3%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

20. Narratives are best understood when they are seen as telling us how we should live.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (1, 3%) | (7, 24%) | (9, 31%) | (8, 28%) | (2, 7%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
- Two respondents (7%) chose not to answer question 20.
21. God is never directly referenced in the book of Esther.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|---------|----------------|
| (2, 7%) | (5, 17%) | (18, 62%) | (1, 3%) | (2, 7%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
- One respondent (3%) chose not to answer question 21.
22. Esther teaches that God is always in control.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| (0) | (0) | (15, 53%) | (10, 34%) | (4, 14%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
23. Genesis chapters 1-3 are recorded primarily to inform us about the order of creation.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (9, 31%) | (7, 24%) | (3, 10%) | (8, 28%) | (2, 7%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
24. I believe that the purpose of recounting the story of David and Goliath is to teach me that I can or should have the faith of David.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (3, 10%) | (7, 24%) | (4, 14%) | (9, 31%) | (5, 17%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
- One respondent (3%) chose not to answer question 24.
25. The primary lesson in the book of Esther is that God's people must make decisions according to faith.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| (0) | (1, 3%) | (14, 48%) | (10, 34%) | (3, 10%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
- One respondent (3%) chose not to answer question 25.
26. It is important to first understand what a story or narrative meant to the Jews in ancient times before I apply it to my life.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| (1, 3%) | (2, 7%) | (11, 38%) | (10, 34%) | (4, 14%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
- One respondent (3%) chose not to answer question 26.
27. Old Testament narratives have little in common with life today.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| (10, 34%) | (17, 59%) | (2, 7%) | (0) | (0) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |

28. The historical setting of the book of Esther is of little importance to understand its meaning.

(3, 10%)	(11, 38%)	(12, 41%)	(1, 3%)	(1, 3%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

One respondent (3%) chose not to answer question 28.

29. I prefer to read the New Testament rather than the Old Testament.

(2, 7%)	(9, 31%)	(7, 24%)	(8, 28%)	(3, 10%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

Short Answer

1. Have you read the book of Esther?
Yes – 13 (45%) No – 16 (55%)
2. Who is the villain in the narrative of Esther?
3. What is the name of the festival celebrated at the end of the book of Esther?
4. Who are the heroes of the narrative of Esther?
5. What is the name of the king in the story?
6. What was Haman planning to do to the Jews?
7. Does the story of Esther provide you with any truths to assist you in your life?
8. If so, what is this truth?
9. How should you live your life according to this truth?
10. What other lessons from the book of Esther are important for the Christian today?

APPENDIX 2
POST-PROJECT SURVEY

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to evaluate the level of understanding as we end this project. This research is being conducted by Kevin Houser for the purposes of his D. Min. studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in expository preaching. In this research, you will be asked to fill in the following survey at the beginning and at the end of the project. Any information you provide will be *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name be identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of this survey below, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Twenty-three people participated, with 0 voided forms. As with the initial survey, some respondents chose not to answer some questions.

Values indicate # of respondents and the rounded percentage representing the group.

General information

The first section of this survey focuses on the basic demographics of participants.

1. How many years has it been since you came to faith in Christ?

1 year or less <u>(0)</u>	2-5 years <u>(3, 13%)</u>	6-10 years <u>(4, 17%)</u>
11-15 years <u>(4, 17%)</u>	16-20 years <u>(3, 13%)</u>	21+ years <u>(9, 39%)</u>

2. My highest level of education is:

<u>(1, 4%)</u> I have some high school	<u>(6, 26%)</u> I finished high school
<u>(10, 43%)</u> I have some college	<u>(3, 13%)</u> I have a bachelor's degree
<u>(0)</u> I have some graduate work	<u>(3, 13%)</u> I have a graduate degree

3. How old are you?

<u>(2, 9%)</u> Less than 20	<u>(0)</u> 20-30
<u>(3, 13%)</u> 31-40	<u>(6, 26%)</u> 41-50
<u>(6, 26%)</u> 51-60	<u>(6, 26%)</u> 61+

4. Indicate your sex: Female (16, 70%) Male (7, 30%)

Old Testament Narrative

These questions will provide information on your understanding of the place of narratives or stories in the Old Testament. Please indicate the number that best represents your understanding.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I understand what is meant by the term “narrative” as applied to biblical stories of the Old Testament.	(0) Strongly Disagree	(0) Disagree	(3, 13%) Uncertain	(14, 43%) Agree	(6, 26%) Strongly Agree
2. I believe that narratives describe real events in history.	(0) Strongly Disagree	(0) Disagree	(1, 4%) Uncertain	(6, 26%) Agree	(16, 70%) Strongly Agree
3. The primary purpose of narratives is to provide an historical account of the Jewish people.	(5, 22%) Strongly Disagree	(3, 13%) Disagree	(3, 13%) Uncertain	(7, 30%) Agree	(5, 22%) Strongly Agree
4. The primary, if not sole, purpose of Old Testament narratives is to provide a backdrop to the New Testament.	(3, 13%) Strongly Disagree	(1, 4%) Disagree	(2, 9%) Uncertain	(8, 35%) Agree	(9, 39%) Strongly Agree
5. I believe that with a few notable exceptions, like the story of Abraham and Isaac, Old Testament narratives do not teach theology.	(8, 35%) Strongly Disagree	(3, 13%) Disagree	(9, 39%) Uncertain	(2, 7%) Agree	(1, 4%) Strongly Agree
6. I believe that the New Testament is more relevant than the Old Testament for modern Christians.	(5, 22%) Strongly Disagree	(9, 39%) Disagree	(2, 9%) Uncertain	(5, 22%) Agree	(2, 9%) Strongly Agree
7. Narratives are the most common genre or type of literature in the Old Testament.	(0) Strongly Disagree	(2, 9%) Disagree	(7, 23%) Uncertain	(9, 39%) Agree	(5, 22%) Strongly Agree

One respondent (4%) chose not to answer question 7.

8. For Christians living in the twenty-first century, the New Testament is more relevant than the Old Testament.
 (5, 22%) (6, 26%) (4, 17%) (5, 22%) (2, 9%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
9. Our primary, if not sole, focus at church should be on the New Testament.
 (11, 48%) (5, 22%) (4, 17%) (1, 4%) (2, 9%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
10. I believe that the story of Esther is real and that Esther, Mordecai, and Haman were real people.
 (0) (0) (1, 4%) (3, 13%) (19, 83%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
11. There is a real connection between the life and times of Esther and the modern world we live in.
 (0) (0) (1, 4%) (9, 39%) (13, 57%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
12. Except for specific detailed stories, such as David and Goliath, the events of the Old Testament seem to run together. I have a hard time knowing when one story ends and another starts.
 (0) (13, 57%) (6, 26%) (2, 9%) (2, 9%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
13. The book of Esther teaches us about Jesus Christ.
 (1, 4%) (1, 4%) (4, 17%) (8, 35%) (9, 39%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
14. I believe that Jonah was swallowed by a real fish.
 (0) (0) (3, 13%) (6, 26%) (14, 61%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
15. It is not important to preach the narratives of the Old Testament.
 (16, 70%) (4, 17%) (2, 9%) (0) (1, 4%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree
16. All Old Testament narratives should be understood in the light of Jesus Christ and the New Testament.
 (0) (0) (4, 17%) (7, 30%) (12, 52%)
 Strongly Disagree Disagree Uncertain Agree Strongly Agree

17. The primary references to Christ in the Old Testament are in the form of specific prophecies.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (4, 17%) | (4, 17%) | (7, 30%) | (5, 22%) | (3, 13%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
18. I believe that the reader determines the meaning of a biblical text.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|---------|----------------|
| (13, 57%) | (6, 26%) | (2, 9%) | (2, 9%) | (0) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
19. Old Testament narratives are primarily man-centered, that is, they are only a history of God's people.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (11, 48%) | (3, 13%) | (4, 17%) | (5, 22%) | (0) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
20. Narratives are best understood when they are seen as telling us how we should live.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (3, 13%) | (4, 17%) | (6, 26%) | (5, 22%) | (5, 22%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
21. God is never directly referenced in the book of Esther.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (0) | (3, 13%) | (2, 13%) | (4, 17%) | (14, 43%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
22. Esther teaches that God is always in control.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (0) | (0) | (2, 9%) | (6, 26%) | (15, 65%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
23. Genesis chapters 1-3 are recorded primarily to inform us about the order of creation.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (4, 17%) | (5, 22%) | (5, 22%) | (4, 17%) | (5, 22%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
24. I believe that the purpose of recounting the story of David and Goliath is to teach me that I can or should have the faith of David.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| (3, 13%) | (4, 17%) | (4, 17%) | (6, 26%) | (6, 26%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
25. The primary lesson in the book of Esther is that God's people must make decisions according to faith.
- | | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| (1, 4%) | (4, 17%) | (2, 9%) | (11, 48%) | (5, 22%) |
| Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |

26. It is important to first understand what a story or narrative meant to the Jews in ancient times before I apply it to my life.				
(1, 4%)	(3, 13%)	(6, 26%)	(7, 30%)	(6, 26%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
27. Old Testament narratives have little in common with life today.				
(14, 61%)	(7, 30%)	(2, 9%)	(0)	(0)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
28. The historical setting of the book of Esther is of little importance to understand its meaning.				
(9, 39%)	(9, 39%)	(2, 9%)	(0)	(2, 9%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree
One respondent (4%) chose not to answer question 28.				
29. I prefer to read the New Testament rather than the Old Testament.				
(1, 4%)	(10, 43%)	(1, 4%)	(7, 30%)	(4, 17%)
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly Agree

Short Answer

1. Have you read the book of Esther?
Yes – 21 (91%) No – 2 (7%)
2. Who is the villain in the narrative of Esther?
3. What is the name of the festival celebrated at the end of the book of Esther?
4. Who are the heroes of the narrative of Esther?
5. What is the name of the king in the story?
6. What was Haman planning to do to the Jews?
7. Does the story of Esther provide you with any truths to assist you in your life?
8. If so, what is this truth?
9. How should you live your life according to this truth?
10. What other lessons from the book of Esther are important for the Christian today?

APPENDIX 3

BEGINNINGS

An Overview of Esther
September 5, 2010

An introduction to the book of Esther preached on September 12, 2010.

Methodological approach

The sermon used a combination of redemptive-historical progression and longitudinal themes, specifically the themes of covenant and providence, to situate the book of Esther in God's plan of redemption, with Christ ushering in the new covenant.

Introduction

In his new book, *The Grand Design*, renowned physicist Stephen Hawking states that the universe spontaneously created itself from nothing simply because of the existence of gravity.¹ Not only was the universe formed out of nothing, but it continues to evolve without the aid of divine guidance of any kind. God has no role in creation. Contrary to Hawking's belief, the book of Esther teaches that God is in control of all things. His providential guidance is directing all things and His covenantal love rests upon His people. He is a God who saves, even when things seem hopeless.

I. Sin creates a noticeable absence of God's presence in a believer's life.

Like the Jews in the book of Esther, believers can find the presence of God conspicuously absent in their lives when they seek security and comfort in the world. Many Jews had become comfortable living in Babylon and refused to return to the Promised Land. So too, Christians can become worldly and fail to seek after and worship God. The grave

¹L. Robert. "Stephen Hawking: God Was Not Needed to Create the Universe," *Telegraph*, Sept 2, 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/09/02/us-britain-hawking-idUSTRE6811FN20100902>. (accessed September 7, 2010)

consequence for walking in disobedience is that God can and will at times withdraw His gracious presence.

II. God's sovereign salvation

The crisis of the book of Esther is the possible annihilation of the Jews. The great question is whether God is disposed to save His people after they have continued to walk in disobedience and worldliness? The wonderful promise for believers is that it is God who sovereignly brings salvation amid chaos and impending death. His particular love is manifest in His providential guidance of all things. Even though God may not appear present, His pervasive yet veiled presence is revealed through unlikely circumstances and extraordinary coincidences. Nothing can separate the believer from the love of God (Rom 8:28).

III. God's covenantal love is always on His people.

While a believer's love toward God can wax and wane, God's covenantal love is consistent, ever faithful, relentless, constantly pursuing and unmerited. Like Israel, there is nothing inherently good about us that is worthy of God's salvation, yet He chose to save. When we were unable to fulfill our obligations, God fulfilled them through Christ's perfect obedience. A believer's great comfort is that even when he or she is walking in disobedience, God is still working out His purposes through His providential care. This fact, however, is not a reason to remain in sin. The next time a believer feels distant from God, or feels like they are under divine discipline, they can take comfort in the truth that their relationship is not determined by their faithfulness, their love, their commitment to Him. Their salvation rests solely on God's unmerited love. Even when God's presence is not felt by a believer, He is at work to bring about the fullness of their salvation.

APPENDIX 4
A TALE OF TWO KINGDOMS

A sermon on Esther 1 preached on September 19, 2020.

Methodological approach

The sermon was designed as an introduction to the book of Esther. The literary element highlighted was the setting of the narrative, while demonstrating how contrast, typology and analogy brought out the meaning of the text.

Introduction

I remember going to Niagara Falls when I was a teen and visiting one of the museums on the main street that celebrated the men and women who dared to cross or shoot the falls. In 1859 a Frenchman by the name of the Great Blondin became the first person to successfully walk on a tightrope across the gorge. The image of tightrope walking helps us to understand the situation at the beginning of the book of Esther. The Jews in Esther's day had become acculturated to life in Babylon. They were walking the tightrope between accommodated faith in God and the attractions of this world. Esther 1 provides a contrast between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God. It is a tale of two kingdoms. One is worldly, motivated by self interest and controlled by incompetents. The other is invisible, eternal and governed by perfect righteousness.

I. The glories of earthly kingdoms.

One of the great attractions for many Christians is the wealth and power that this world offers. The kingdom of Ahasuerus demonstrates the seeming limitless riches that are available for those who live according the rules of the kingdom. However, the riches of this world cannot be compared to the riches of God's kingdom. It is a stark contrast between the earthly and the eternal. Christians must remember the Psalmist words in Psalm 2, that there is an eternal battle waging between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God. Believers must not succumb to the attractions of the glories of earthly kingdoms, especially as they are so readily available in our culture.

II. A contrast of rulers.

The image presented of Ahasuerus reminds the believer that the rulers of this world are self-serving, unjust and prone to anger. His rule provides a sharp contrast to Christ's righteous rule. No matter how benevolent and good leaders may appear in this world, the believer is to remember that he or she serves the true King. Jesus is not capricious, unjust and never prone to anger. Believers can have confidence that Jesus will always have their best interests at heart and that nothing that comes happens is by accident, for He rules perfectly. Believers are to serve Jesus their King.

III. An empty house of cards.

Despite his wealth and power, Ahasuerus' is challenged by Vashti, whose disobedience threatens to destabilize the kingdom. The believer lives in an earthly world of instability. No matter how stable things may appear on the outside, worldly power and authority can fall like a house of cards. The only one who is perfect in character, worthy of power, omnipotent, righteous and holy is Jesus. His Kingdom can never be shaken. It will never fall. Unlike Ahasuerus, Jesus' authority is demonstrated in humility and servanthood.

Christians are called to live in this world for the glory of God. They must never conform to it or be assimilated by it. Glamour, wealth and materialism offer power and prestige, but the believer must remember that he or she belongs to God and must serve only Him. The power that worldly kingdoms and authorities wield may at times appear harmless, but it is real and it will tantalize and will ultimately challenge even the strongest of faith. Ultimately, all worldly kingdoms will all fall like a house of cards. The Christian must decide whom he will serve.

APPENDIX 5
PERSIAN IDOL

A sermon on Esther 2 preached September 26, 2010.

Methodological approach

The major literary element discussed was character development in the protagonists of Mordecai and Esther while analogy was the principle means of interpretation.

Introduction

Just a few weeks ago the unthinkable happened. An Indian-born British girl, whose parents own land in Florida, won the title of Miss America's Perfect teen. In chapter 2 the orphaned Esther wins the Persian beauty pageant, but ends up compromising her faith and her identity as part of the family of God. While Christians must learn to live in the world, they must not accommodate to it.

I. The contest is announced.

The battle between the two kingdoms continues to rage even today and Christians are people with their feet planted in two worlds. While the believer is physically in this world, he or she is also a member of God's heavenly Kingdom. Because of this duality, believers must expect tension and spiritual warfare. This war is not always something the Christian will be able to see as dangerous, but they will be tempted to place their trust in the things they can touch or appropriate, like wealth and power. The world's seductions are tantalizing and its effects deadly. The battle is one of compromise and accommodation. Believers must learn to live in this world, yet always remember that they belong to God.

II. The pre-judging favorite.

Wealth, power and glamour are all things that this world offers. Esther succumbed to the temptation and accommodated with the world. She found favor. When a believer is tempted and accommodates himself/herself to the world, they will find ways to acquire

the thing that has captured their heart at all costs. Accommodation with the world is a slippery slope that will result in a denial of God's worthiness to be worshipped.

III. And the winner is...

Compromise can be an easy path for a believer to follow, especially when it appears to offer great advantage, but ultimately, compromise means denying God's call upon their life. Esther compromised and ended up denying her identity as a Jew. Believers must understand that compromise with the world has serious consequences. The greatest of these consequences is a denial of our salvation and God's righteous rulership over us.

IV. Fortuitous circumstances or guiding hand?

Esther can hardly be held up as a paragon of virtue, yet God is quietly working behind the scenes, guiding things by His providential care. Even when God's people act in sinful disobedience, God is intimately involved and working out all things to His glory. His providential guidance is seen through what may appear random events or good fortune. So while a believer may feel like they have done everything wrong, they can be assured that God is still at work. This confidence does not mean that the believer is allowed to keep on sinning. God's claims on our lives are absolute. The believer serves a holy God and must learn to joyfully surrender to Him.

APPENDIX 6
THE SPIRIT OF HAMAN

A sermon on Esther 3 preached October 3, 2010.

Methodological approach

The sermon highlighted the literary aspects of plot development, tension, foreshadowing and characterization in Hebrew narrative. The features of longitudinal themes, typology and analogy provided the basis for interpreting Haman's desire and plot to kill the Jews.

Introduction

As in the old westerns when the bad guy walks into the saloon and everyone stiffens in expectation of a gunfight, so Haman now enters the scene. He is an Agagite, a sworn enemy of God's people; a man ruled by anger and a desire for personal honor.

I. The injustice of this world.

It's difficult when someone is honored in our place. Be it at work or even at church, the believer must realize that this world is typified by injustice. We live in a fallen world, run by fallen people. The believer must also remember that there are consequences for sin. Sometimes those consequences lurk unnoticed for years, but they have a way of coming back to haunt us. If sin is not dealt with it will not just complicate our lives, but threaten to unravel it. The truth is that there is a spirit of Haman in the world. The believer lives between two kingdoms and peace is like a tinderbox. A spirit of Haman is always close at hand and can arise from almost anywhere.

II. God is sovereign.

Again, believers must remember how precarious and fickle the apparent peace is between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God. Despite Satan's desire to destroy a believer's faith, God is silently at work behind the scenes to save them. While the intentions of evil men like Haman promise death, God is working out the salvation of His people. Even when believers fail to walk obediently with God, he or she may be assured that God justifies not on the basis of their righteousness, but on Christ's righteousness.

There are only two types of people in the world. Some will bow to Jesus as their Lord and Savior while others will not bow to Him. Those who bow learn to joyfully submit to His all-encompassing power, while the rest will one day receive their just desserts.

APPENDIX 7
MAKING A STAND

A sermon on Esther 4 preached October 17, 2010.

Methodological approach

The chief literary aspects of Hebrew narrative highlighted were plot and character development. The ways of longitudinal themes, promise-fulfillment, typology and analogy were the means of discussing and interpreting Esther's decision to risk her life and intercede on behalf of the Jews before the king.

Introduction

In the 1953 western classic "Shane," Shane tries to blend in with the people around him until he is forced to make a stand against evil and save the local ranchers. In every believer's life, there are going to be defining moments when they will need to take a stand for God. Will they remain committed to this world and its trappings, or will they decide to walk by faith as a child of God?

I. Compromise with the world is never good.

For the believer, accommodation with the world can mean suppressing their true identity as part of the people of God. Continual compromise moves the believer farther and farther away from the life that God desires for them. They will eventually find themselves isolated from God and His people, out of touch with spiritual realities and out of touch with God's concerns in the world. Even worse, a believer can become so isolated from God and His people that they are indistinguishable from the rest of society. In Matthew 5, Jesus calls believers to be a light on display for all to see. The believer's allegiance must never be hidden, never in question, never confused.

II. A compromised life is revealed by a lack of prayer.

What do you do when things go wrong in your life? Do you seek God in prayer, or do you solely try and fix it yourself? Do you seek divine intervention or human intervention? One of the grave consequences of worldliness is that the believer learns to trust in the tangible things of life or their own ability to deal with situations. If a

Christian lives a life of compromise with the world, they will learn to rely on the efforts of men and not God.

III. God's salvation will arise.

Like Esther, we were all once under the curse of the law. The righteous demands of a holy God mean that sinful men are under the penalty of death for entering God's presence. Our plight revealed the absolute necessity of a mediator, someone to plead our case before the throne of the King. Yet the necessity of this intervention is not based on God's compassion toward the sinner, rather His own commitment to His covenantal promise to save. The believer can be assured that even his or her half hearted commitment to holiness and godliness cannot match God's sovereign love toward them. Even when things seem bleakest, God will not abandon His people; salvation will arise from somewhere.

IV. Believers must make a stand.

Like Esther, Jesus identified with God's people and obediently committed Himself to intercede and bring salvation. God is good and just, yet to be feared more than any leader of the kingdoms of this world. God has provided a means of salvation for the believer and He expects them to live by faith. In every believer's life there are defining moments when they must decide to identify fully as a follower of Jesus Christ and commit themselves to God's will and principles. A believer must be resolved to follow Esther's words and Christ's example and say "If I die I die." Who knows whether they have been raised up for such a time as this?

APPENDIX 8
SETTING THE TRAP

A sermon on Esther 5 preached October 24, 2010.

Methodological approach

The sermon highlighted the literary aspect of plot development, specifically conflict leading to climax. The ways of typology, longitudinal themes, contrast, promise-fulfillment, redemptive-historical progression and analogy were all employed in order to understand why Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a second feast instead of seeking the salvation of the Jews when she had the opportunity at the first feast.

Introduction

Even though I come from a long line of outdoorsmen, I am not much of a hunter or a fisherman. I do know, however, that to be a successful fisherman one has to not only set the hook just right, but also allow the fish some play when he strikes. In chapter 5 Esther acts shrewdly and purposefully, seeking her best advantage for saving her people.

I. Living purposefully and patiently in this world.

When dealing with the kingdoms of this world, it is important for the believer to remember that the enemies of God wield real power and authority. Instead of taking a bull by the horns kind of attitude to ungodliness and injustice, sometimes the best course of action to be subtle yet purposeful. Instead of being confrontational, a less direct approach can often gain an advantage for the believer that can help them in their godly goals. If a believer is committed to accomplishing God's will in a world that is antagonistic to them, then patience, shrewdness and purposefulness are keys to success.

II. Beware of the idols of our hearts.

Pride and anger are just two of the strong emotions that people experience. When they arise in the life of a believer, they usually indicate that there are idols in their life. Whether they are tangible things like cars or houses, or intangible, like pride and lust, what makes a believer become defensive and hostile is often that which they covet in their heart. Believers are to beware of pride and anger in their lives.

The believer is also to take great comfort that they have a greater mediator than Esther. If he or she is committed to accomplishing the tasks that God has given them, they need to remember that God is quietly at work behind the scenes. As the prime mover of all things, they need to watch for His subtle and mysterious ways and work alongside of Him. It is a great source of comfort for the believer that God uses not only their good qualities and virtues, but also their greatest sins and greatest compromises.

APPENDIX 9
POETIC JUSTICE

A sermon on Esther 6 preached October 31, 2010.

Methodological approach

The sermon highlighted the role of peripety, reversals, chiasm, irony and divine confluence, or coming together, in Old Testament narratives. Typology, contrast and analogy brought forth the spiritual meaning of this the pivotal chapter of the narrative.

Introduction

For many reporters the rescue of the Chilean miners was also a triumph in human ingenuity. After all, was it not the high tech equipment and knowhow of engineers that saved them? For those with eyes of faith, it was obvious that God saved them and that it was nothing short of a miracle. In chapter 5 Esther does all she can in her preparations to save her people and in chapter 7 she intercedes on their behalf, but in chapter 6, the pivotal point of the story, it is God who is sovereignly in control. It is God who brings salvation through a series of seemingly unrelated and insignificant events.

I. The confluence of God's providence.

Believers can be assured that even in their darkest hours God is sovereignly in control of every aspect of life. His providential hand is silently yet inexorably moving all things toward their appointed time, like the confluence of the mighty Amazon River. Even though God may appear silent and seemingly uninvolved, He is actually sovereignly in control of even the small details of life. No matter how things may appear, God is ruling. The believer can be comforted that God is intimately involved in the common everyday aspects of life. The confluence of His providential care is working through seemingly insignificant events.

II. Peripety and God's justice.

God's justice has a way of working itself out through great reversals, peripety. The greatest reversal of history is that through Jesus' sacrifice God grants eternal life to sinners who are deserving of eternal damnation. Because of this relationship, believers have the confidence that God's justice will prevail and that He will eventually right all wrongs, even in the darkest hours of life. He is guiding all things to their fulfillment in Himself and in that fulfillment perfect justice will be measured out.

APPENDIX 10

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

A sermon on Esther 7 preached November 7, 2010.

Methodological approach

The sermon highlighted the literary features of reversals and climax, while the meaning and application of the text were derived from contrast, typology and longitudinal themes.

Introduction

It seems that almost every day in the news there is another story of some well know person who reveals that they have some great secret. Whether it is their sexual orientation or substance abuse, the common tie is that they have been living a lie. They claimed to be one person, but in reality they had a secret life. In chapter 7 Esther reveals her secret, that she is a Jew, and in so doing intercedes on behalf of her people.

I. The necessity of human responsibility.

God is sovereignly in control of all things, but there is also a necessity of human responsibility to act in accordance to His revealed will. For believers who wish to act in obedience, there are two errors. The first error is to sit back and wait on God, hoping that the answers to our problems materialize out of nothing and drop into our laps. The second error is to become so active that we preclude God's involvement, believing that something is only going to get done if I do it.

God is sovereign and His sovereignty works through not only remarkable circumstances but through the faithful efforts of His people. Because God is Holy and man is sinful, there was a desperate need of a mediator. Jesus perfectly identified Himself with the people He came to save. He chose to be obedient unto death and in so doing gained salvation for God's people.

II. Divine justice is meted out.

The ultimate downfall of evil is assured. God's perfect justice and salvation always win the day because His desire and ability to save are based in His covenantal promises. Evil is always personal and always against God. Despite being unworthy of God's salvation, the believer finds justice and mercy both in the cross of Christ.

APPENDIX 11

THE EYE OF THE STORM

A sermon on Esther 8 preached on November 14, 2010.

Methodological approach

The sermon highlighted the literary devices of irony and reversals and the meaning of the text was explained by way of analogy, longitudinal themes, redemptive-historical progression, typology, promise-fulfillment and contrast.

Introduction

All around Port Lavaca colored weather maps of the area cover the walls of stores. They show the greatest hurricane to hit the Gulf Coast, Claudette in 2003, with the eye of the hurricane right over Port Lavaca. In Esther 8 the salvation for the Jews is finally granted and the problem of the irrevocable law of the king has been circumvented by a new law permitting the Jews to defend themselves, but salvation has not yet been gained.

I. Lifting the law of death.

The law of sin and death has been fulfilled in Christ so there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Romans 8:2 states that “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.” Believers were once under the irrevocable penalty of death for their sin, but God established a new law in Christ and granted them salvation. The believer can be assured that God’s perfect righteousness and justice is always worked out to His glory, but it may not be always seen or rejoiced in by them.

II. The question of Holy War.

Despite our preconceived ideas, Holy War was always an issue of sinfulness. God’s holiness demanded that sin be punished, which means that all of mankind is under the penalty of death for sin. Holy War, the targeting of sinners for destruction, was then the natural outworking of God’s holiness. For the believer, the penalty was paid for through the death of Christ. God the Father declared Holy War on Jesus on our behalf when He was abandoned to die on the cross. In Christ, the power of sin was vanquished and the guilt of sin removed. Believers are now agents of God’s righteousness, proclaiming the Gospel and declaring that the war against sin has been won in Christ.

APPENDIX 12
SALVATION AT LAST

A sermon on Esther 9 & 10 preached on November 21, 2010.

Methodological approach

The key literary elements discussed were reversals and denouement. Typology, contrast, analogy, redemptive-historical progression, and longitudinal themes were all used to highlight the meaning of the text.

Introduction

The new computer virus Stuxnet recently wreaked havoc on Iranian nuclear plants. It's believed that its origin is the Israeli secret service, a preemptive strike to ward off the Arab nuclear threat. What's interesting is that in the decoded lines is a reference to Hadassah, Esther. In chapter 9 the Jews preempt the law of death and find relief from their enemies. Chapter 10 closes with Mordecai reigning as second in command of the Persian Empire, looking out for the interests of God's people.

I. The steadfastness of God's eternal promises.

God's Word is steadfast and eternal. What He promises to do, He will accomplish. Even when His people are distant, disobedient and unresponsive, His loving purposes for them are being worked out. More often than not, God fulfills his promises, not through the miraculous, but through everyday events. A believer may rest assured that God's providential care is always working for their best and for God's glory. Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

II. A celebration of rest.

Salvation brings rest and peace with God. The believer has been the recipient of a great reversal of fortune. Instead of death, they now know eternal life. The celebration of this rest is to be part of the believer's life, to be shared from one generation to another. This celebration of life also looks forward to the final celebration of the Lamb's wedding feast, where all of the redeemed of the Lord shall be in attendance.

III. Forever interceding.

One of the great promises for the Christian is that Jesus is forever more at the right hand of God the Father, interceding on their behalf. Even though a believer enjoys spiritual rest, they must continue to live in this evil world. Jesus is our advocate and He will continue to look out for the needs of His people.

APPENDIX 13

SERMON EVALUATION FORM

Preacher's Name: _____

Date: _____

Evaluator's Name: _____

Place Preached: _____

Text: _____

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to evaluate the level of understanding as we begin this project. This research is being conducted by Kevin Houser for the purposes of his dissertation studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in expository preaching. In this research, you will be asked to fill in the following sermon survey at the end of each sermon. Any information you provide will be *strictly confidential*, and at no time will your name be reported, or your name be identified with your responses. *Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time.*

By your completion of this survey below, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this research.

Please indicate your response to the following concerns by circling the number that best that best represents your opinion.

1	2	3	4	5
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Sermon Delivery

Clothing and Appearance

(0)	(0)	(1)	(27)	(20)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Mannerisms and Gestures

(0)	(0)	(3)	(21)	(24)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Eye Contact and Voice

(0)	(0)	(4)	(14)	(29)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Message Content

Introduction – engaging and clearly sets direction and tone of the sermon.

(0)	(0)	(2)	(16)	(30)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Expository Merit – the sermon’s points were derived from the story.

(0)	(0)	(0)	(10)	(38)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Illustrations – descriptive illustrations that emphasized the sermon’s points.

(0)	(0)	(1)	(12)	(35)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Relevant – the meaning of the text becomes important for the listeners.

(0)	(0)	(1)	(7)	(40)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Application – good bridges made between the ancient and modern worlds.

(0)	(0)	(3)	(12)	(35)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Conclusion – engaging and thought-provoking.

(0)	(0)	(0)	(9)	(39)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Overall impact – memorable.

(0)	(0)	(0)	(8)	(40)
Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Outstanding

Genre – please indicate your response with a check

- | | | | |
|---|----------|-----|------------|
| 1. Was the setting adequately explained? | Yes (38) | No_ | Uncertain_ |
| 2. Was the plot adequately explained and followed? | Yes (38) | No_ | Uncertain_ |
| 3. Were the characters developed? | Yes (38) | No_ | Uncertain_ |
| 4. After the sermon, did I better understand the narrative and its meaning? | Yes (38) | No_ | Uncertain_ |
| 5. Was the sermon meaningful and relevant to me? | Yes (38) | No_ | Uncertain_ |

APPENDIX 14

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

- Week 1: August 22, 2010—I selected and trained a sermon evaluation working team and directed the initial congregational survey (Appendix 1) at beginning of worship service.
- Week 2: August 29, 2010—I taught the first Sunday school lecture “Understanding Hebrew Narratives” part 1.
- Week 3: September 5, 2010—I taught the second Sunday school lecture on “Understanding Hebrew Narratives” part 2.
- Week 4: September 12, 2010—“Beginnings,” sermon 1 one based on an overview of the book of Esther, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart Group.
- Week 5: September 19, 2010—A Tale of Two Kingdoms, sermon 2 based on Esther 1, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart Group.
- Week 6: September 26, 2010—Persian Idol, sermon 3 based on Esther 2, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart Group.
- Week 7: October 3, 2010—“The Spirit of Haman,” sermon 4 based on Esther 3, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart Group.
- Week 8: October 17, 2010—“Making a Stand,” sermon 5 based on Esther 4, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart group.
- Week 9: October 24, 2010—“Setting the Trap,” sermon 6 based on Esther 5, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart Group.
- Week 10: October 31, 2010—“Poetic Justice,” sermon 7 based on Esther 6, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart Group.
- Week 11: November 7, 2010—“What a Difference a Day Makes,” sermon 8 based on Esther 7, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart Group.
- Week 12: November 14, 2010—“The Eye of the Storm,” sermon 9 based on Esther 8, sermon evaluation and corresponding Heart Berean Group.
- Week 13: November 21, 2010—“Salvation at Last,” sermon 10 based on Esther chapters

9 and 10, sermon evaluation and corresponding Berean Heart Group.

Week 14: November 28—I taught the second Sunday school lecture, “Seven Pathways to Legitimately Seeking Christ in Old Testament Narratives” part 1.

Week 15: December 5, 2010—I taught the second Sunday school lecture, “Seven Pathways to Legitimately Seeking Christ in Old Testament Narratives” part 2, directed the retaking of the initial survey (Appendix 2) and debriefed of the sermon evaluation team.

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ABSTRACT

ILLUSTRATING THE RELEVANCE OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE THROUGH THE EXPOSITORY PREACHING OF ESTHER AT HOPE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH, PORT LAVACA, TEXAS

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This project was designed to create increased appreciation in the congregation's understanding of how and why Old Testament narrative is important and relevant for their spiritual lives. Chapter 1 outlines the ministry context at Hope Fellowship Church, the project's purpose and the project's goals. Chapter 2 examines the biblical and theological rationale that Old Testament narrative is important for Christians. Chapter 3 examines the homiletical concerns associated with Esther and Christological approaches for preaching the narrative. Chapter 4 is a review of the implementation of the project's three inter-related components: a ten week expository preaching series through the book of Esther; sermon based small groups, known as Berean Heart Groups; and four weeks of Sunday school classes. Chapter 5 is an analysis of the surveys taken by the congregants of Hope Fellowship before and after the project and demonstrates that the church indeed benefited from this project.

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