



Why is He Preaching on That? by Ryan Reese

We envision a congregation whose love for Jesus and one another leaves a clear and compelling witness for Christ.

Most of the good people at Pinehurst Baptist Church are polite enough to never say it to my face, but I can sometimes see the question on your faces. Some of you may wonder from time to time how the bald guy behind the pulpit decides what to preach. Do I just throw a dart at the "Books of the Bible" map on the wall? Do I prayerfully set my open Bible in the windowsill and let the Holy Spirit determine with His gentle breeze where the fluttering pages will stop? Or do I tear a page from Charles Spurgeon's book and pace the floor at night, heavily puffing on a cigar, until my wife reads aloud a passage that sparks my interest? Well, it looks a little more like this...

Why do you preach exclusively from the Bible?

Because I believe that the Bible is God's inspired word to human beings, I preach from it every time we meet for corporate worship. We do not worship idols of our own making who cannot speak or change us. We do not worship created things or the man-made rules of religion. We worship the God who speaks, who has revealed Himself in time and space to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Samuel, David, Isaiah, Malachi, John the Baptist, and the Apostles. We worship the God who has revealed Himself most clearly in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. When I step into the pulpit my goal is to expose everyone listening to God's words, not mine.

The Bible is not like any other book. When we hear God's word, the Spirit has the power to create spiritual life in those who are spiritually dead (Rom. 10:17; Ezek. 37:1-14; 1 Thess. 1:4-7; 2:13; 1 Cor. 1:21-25). When we hear God's word, He calls us to salvation (2 Corinthians 5:20). You may find it strange that most of my sermons include a clear explanation of the gospel and an admonition for any in the room to

repent and trust Christ if they don't know Him already. But I never assume that everyone in the building has been born again (John 3:1-8), and always hope that as I'm preaching God's word He might be giving one of His enemies a brand new heart.

But, of course, God's word isn't just at work in the hearts of those who don't believe. Biblical preaching is also a powerful way the Holy Spirit builds up and strengthens the saints. Paul tells us that Scripture does this in two ways, with both a positive and negative edge: to powerfully shape right belief and right practice in Christians (2 Tim. 3:16). *Teaching* happens when the congregation learns from Scripture about the character and person of God. *Reproof* takes place as Scripture confronts lies about who God is and how He works. By *correction* and *training in righteousness*, Paul means that the exposition of Scripture both instructs us positively in right ways of living and negatively as it comes against evil practices.

Why do you preach through whole books of the Bible?

God did not give His word to us in the form of a topical dictionary. He did not simply give us a collection of wise, pithy sayings, though certain books like the Proverbs and the Psalms may appear to be ordered in random fashion. God gave us instead one massive story, the tale of redemption from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem, in the form of sixty-six books. The books are not all the same *kind* (or genre) of book. Some of them are narratives, telling the story of God and His interaction with

people. Other books in the Bible are law-heavy, telling God's people how He calls them to live. Some of the books are full of poetry and prayers, wise sayings, or warnings from God's prophets. The New Testament even includes several letters written to churches in the first century.

I believe that teaching through entire books of the Bible is the best way to be faithful to God's own organization of His Word. Each book, though only a part of the whole, has its own structure, its own internal logic and progression of thought that can be lost if not understood on its own. Preaching through books of the Bible helps to keep God's word in context, understanding the words and sentences and paragraphs in light of what was written before and after them. After all, our desire is to understand God's words as *He* intended them. Pulling verses out of context always puts us in danger of forcing *our own* meaning on them. Hearing sermons through books of the Bible not only keeps the preacher from bending verses any direction he chooses, but it also teaches the listener a more faithful approach to studying the Bible on their own. You need to understand God's word rightly in your easy chair as well as the church pew.

Preaching through books of the Bible also forces both congregation and pastor to deal with *all* that God has said. Honestly, there are certain topics or passages in Scripture that I would rather avoid—and you would rather I did too. Last week I preached on the judgment of God on the wicked, not because it is my personal soapbox, but because it came

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All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Why is He Preaching on That? (continued)

up next in the book of Exodus. When divorce, or sexual sin, or predestination and election come up in the course of a book, then that will be the main topic of my sermon. I'm not preaching that text because "so-and-so" got a divorce, or "what's-her-problem" won't submit to her husband. I'm preaching that text because it is the next block of Scripture and we need to hear it. Sermons are not given according to what I am comfortable saying or what you enjoy hearing, but according to what God has said in His word.

Why are you preaching on THAT book of the Bible?

My desire is to expose the church to the whole counsel of God. I began my ministry at Pinehurst by preaching inch by inch through the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at the heart of the message of the Bible (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39, 46). Christians are saved by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, are to live in obedience to teachings of Jesus, and are given the mission of making more disciples of Jesus Christ. Matthew's testimony to the life and teaching of Jesus is where I wanted to start.

Next, I preached through the book of Hebrews, a book that heavily emphasizes two ideas I thought quite important for our church body: continuing to trust in Christ as the world becomes increasingly hostile to Christianity, and understanding the riches we have in Jesus. In Hebrews we saw repeatedly how the Old Testament leads up to and is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Now we are putting that truth to work as we move through the book of Exodus.

In the future, we will be bouncing back and forth between the Testaments and from genre to genre with each new sermon series. I will also be preaching through books of the Bible more quickly, so that we never lose sight of the one story each book is a part of: redemption in Christ. What is in the queue? After Exodus we will examine

Paul's letter to the Galatians, then look at the wisdom literature of Job and the Psalms. Also on the list is the book of Acts, First and Second Samuel, and even (gasp!) Revelation. Then we'll work through one of the prophets, then back to a Gospel book, followed by a book from the Law, and so on.

Of course, none of this is set in stone. Selecting books of the Bible for preaching is a Spirit-led endeavor, soaked in prayer. If God infests my mind with a passion to preach through Matthew again starting this Sunday, then I will do it (please, don't Lord!). But I've found the Holy Spirit can work just as deeply in planning as in the moment of preaching. The purpose of plotting a course is to insure hearing from all of God's word, not just the parts we are familiar or comfortable with.

Why the occasional topical series or sermon?

From time to time we deviate from the preaching of a book of the Bible and have a short series on a particular topic. Again, preaching is a spiritual undertaking. Sometimes tragedy strikes and it is appropriate to respond with God's word to what everyone is thinking about anyway (like Newtown). Ethical issues and trends can force their way onto the national scene and I am led to respond by clarifying the Bible's teaching on such topics (like gender roles, abortion, and human sexuality). Needs may arise within the church which require topical preaching to address (such as church membership, church leadership, marriage and family, or singleness). If I sense that certain wrong beliefs or practices are catching fire in the world and could become influential or attractive to the saints, I want to preach God's word accordingly.

Often the topics can be addressed as one preaches through a book of the Bible. Other times, a detour is needed to bring the topic into sharper

focus. But even in a topical series, the word that is preached will still be God's word. I simply have to work harder to keep passages in context and not wield them irresponsibly to make them say what I *myself* want to say. I'd like to preach a series sometime on the person of the Holy Spirit, prayer, the evangelism of Jesus, God and the poor, and much more besides. They may spring out of the study of particular books, or we may take a break and do them topically. God may reveal to me that they were my ideas more than His, and the potential series will fall to the floor. But as long as I am preaching from God's word, I have the freedom to change things up from time to time.

A Final Word About Listening Sermons

Preaching and planning to preach is spiritual work to be done prayerfully and in submission to God. But listening to a sermon is a spiritual task as well. You should come to corporate worship expecting to hear from God, not to judge the performance of His messenger. You should come prayerfully, asking God to change you, challenge you, encourage you, and give you the good spiritual food that you need. Read the sermon text before you get there, dwell prayerfully on it during the week, and reflect on the passage when you leave.

And don't forget to pray for the preacher. He is a sinner in need of God's transforming word just like you. He doesn't want to get in the way of God's word to you but send a clear signal to your heart and mind. If his preaching of the Scriptures makes you feel bad about your sin, don't waste time wondering if he was thinking about you. Know that *God* was thinking about you, and embrace the loving discipline of your heavenly Father. If the pastor's words encourage you, praise *God* for His encouragement and praise Him for the peace, joy, and strength that come from hearing His word.

