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Critical Concept
Series

VOLUME ONE



WHITE PAPERS

HEARING THE MUSIC OF THE GOSPEL

HEARING THE
**MUSIC OF
THE GOSPEL**
Christ-Centered Bible Study

by Keith E. Johnson, Ph.D.

Imagine yourself in a large house in which those who are deaf and those who can hear are living together.¹ In one of the rooms, you see a guy sitting in a chair and listening to music on his iPod. Rhythmically, he's tapping his foot, drumming his thighs, jutting his chin out, swaying to the beat, and pursing his lips like Mick Jagger or someone. His entire body moves in response to what his ears are hearing. It's obvious that he's enjoying himself and listening to a pretty good song.

A few minutes later, one of the deaf persons enters the room. Seeing the guy listening to the music and impersonating Mick Jagger, he thinks, That looks like fun. I think I'll try that. So he sits down next to him and begins to imitate him. Awkwardly at first, he tries drumming his thighs, jutting his chin out, and swaying to the music just like the guy with the iPod. With a little practice, he begins to catch onto it. By watching and trying, he begins to mirror the other guy's actions pretty closely. But although he eventually gets better at keeping time, he concludes that it's not as much fun or as easy as it initially seemed (especially the chin jut—very difficult to do when you're not actually hearing the music).

After a while, a third person enters the room and watches this scene. What does he see? Two people apparently doing the same thing, apparently listening to the same thing. Is there a difference? Absolutely. The first guy hears the music and his actions are a natural response to the music's rhythm and

melody. The second guy is merely imitating the outward actions. Being deaf, he's not listening to anything.

There's an important spiritual parallel here. The dance (outward actions) represents the Christian life, while the music represents the grace of the gospel. Though we have come to know Christ through grace, we are often like the deaf man in the story who tries to perform the dance without hearing the music. Our spiritual life is reduced to a series of dance steps—external behaviors and activities—devoid of God's animating and transforming power. God's desire is not to get us to do the dance but to get us to hear the music of the gospel, with the dance (godly actions, character, and activities) flowing naturally from it.

The term gospel literally means "good news." In the New Testament, the gospel encompasses not only the forgiveness of sins but also everything else that God has done for us in Christ (adoption, reconciliation, justification, and so forth). What follows in this article is a brief reflection on how to tune in to the music of the gospel, listening for its rhythm as you read the Scriptures.

Understanding the Redemptive Focus of Scripture

We all have a proclivity to perform—to act in ways we are expected to act in order to receive the affirmation we crave. We also, perhaps through years of schooling, have

come to believe that what matters most is not the process of growth or learning but what we get for grades, how well we perform on SATs, what we produce. Whatever the baggage, whatever its origins, it's there. And it can lead us to look to the Bible and see nothing more than a collection of ethical directives instructing us in how to live. But to read Scripture in this way is to reduce it to dance steps—the dos and don'ts of the Christian life—and to miss the melody entirely. To hear the music of the gospel, we need to understand how God intends his Word to function in our lives.

The writer of Hebrews gives us a push in the right direction. In chapter 4 he urges his readers not to harden their hearts and miss the rest that God has provided in Christ (Hebrews 4:1-11). He closes with the following statement: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (verses 12-13, ESV).

Notice how the writer describes the role of Scripture in our lives, likening it to the sharpest sword imaginable—a sword that penetrates to the deepest recesses of our soul. As a result, we are “naked and exposed” before God. What the writer wants us to see is that Scripture, first, is designed to expose the sinful condition of our heart, not simply to prescribe a new behavior.

Several years ago I had a stressful week prior to a major conference I was leading. A number of times I found myself asking my wife's forgiveness for being rude to her. In the back of my mind, however, I really believed that the problem lay in my circumstances. If my life weren't so stressful, I told myself, I wouldn't be treating the people around me so poorly.

The following Sunday, our pastor spoke from Deuteronomy 8 about how God tests our hearts to reveal what's in them. It was as if God's Spirit said to me, “Your problem is not these circumstances. These circumstances have merely revealed what was in your heart.” This is precisely what Scripture is intended to do—reveal our brokenness that requires the work and person of Christ.

I realize that what I have said so far about Scripture is not particularly upbeat and something you'd want to dance to (nothing like hearing how wretched and loathsome we are to get those toes tapping!). But the choreography of grace cannot be directly accessed; you must first waltz through

brokenness and repentance. Those who seek to move directly to the upbeat and eliminate the downbeat destroy the tune entirely.

Graciously, Scripture does not leave us on the downbeat: naked, exposed in our sin. Notice how the writer of Hebrews continues: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

The writer of Hebrews does not point us toward a program of behavior modification but instead to a person. The remedy for our brokenness is not in corrective dance steps but in Christ.

Most New Testament scholars believe that the original readers of the book of Hebrews were Jewish Christians (thus the name of the book). A number of them had experienced persecution because of their faith and some were tempted to walk away from Christ. In this context the writer paints a portrait of Christ as one who fundamentally understands the readers' problems because, in his human nature, he experienced the same temptations they were experiencing. Through this and other portraits of Christ, the writer of Hebrews is attempting to woo the hearts of his readers to the love and beauty of Christ.

This highlights a second role of Scripture—pointing our hearts to our Savior. We tend to limit this dimension of Scripture to those who are outside the Christian faith. That is, we assume that the primary role of Scripture for the unbeliever is pointing his or her heart toward Christ. We often fail to recognize that our hearts constantly need to be pointed to Christ as well.

Here's what I mean. If you were to explain the gospel to a non-Christian—say, a non-Christian who swears like a dockworker—you would want him to acknowledge his sin (including profanity) and need for forgiveness, right? And, if he acknowledged that, you would then point him to Christ for forgiveness, acceptance, and grace. But what happens when we, as believers, have a swearing problem? We tell each other to stop swearing. Or we tell ourselves to stop swearing. And when we come to the Scriptures, what we read between every line is “Stop swearing! Christians don't act that way!”

What happened to the gospel for us? How did our dynamic walk with Christ mutate into Christian Behavior 101?

Or we might point out to a non-Christian, as we are sharing the gospel with her, that she has falsely turned to things other than God (things like success, drugs, sex, approval, whatever) to meet her needs and make her life work. But as believers, aren't we still tempted to make our lives work apart from Christ? Don't we often seek life apart from him in control, influence, approval, performance, or any number of other alternatives. We, too, need to constantly be pointed back to Christ, in whom alone life can be found. We continue to need to hear the music of the gospel and never outgrow it.

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture does two things: (1) it exposes our brokenness; and (2) it points us to our Savior. That's the gospel, and we want to look at each of these in more detail.

Portraits of Our Brokenness

The primary question on most of our minds as we read and apply Scripture is "What does this passage teach about what I am supposed to do?" Yet if we read the Bible merely looking for dance steps, we'll fail to hear the music of the gospel. To hear the music of the gospel, we must first ask a different question: "What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?"

Let's look briefly at three examples.

First, imagine you are reading the book of James. You come across the following: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your

life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil" (James 4:13-16).

In this passage James appears to criticize all attempts to plan for the future. If we start by asking, "What should I do?" then we may attempt to identify situations in which planning for the future is wrong. ("What do you mean I need to hand in my assignment on Tuesday?! Blasphemer!") However, by doing this, we may entirely miss James's point. In fact, we would. If, however, we ask the question "What does this reveal about my brokenness that requires Christ's work in my life?" then we are in a better position to discern James's true purpose.

Notice the reference to "boast" and "boasting" in verse 16. James is speaking to a prideful spirit of independence that says, "I'm the master of my fate, the controller of my destiny. I'm the man." James invites me to come to the Lord acknowledging my propensity to try to control my future and live independently from him. I must repent of my lack of faith in his goodness. Thus the real dance step is not about planning at all. What I hear Christ saying is "Entrust your future to me," not merely "Stop making boastful claims about your future, you braggart." This kind of trust requires a renovation of my soul.

Next, imagine you're reading through the Gospel of Mark. In chapter 10 you read about an incident that takes place as Jesus and his disciples are making their final journey to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. Immediately after Jesus tells his disciples that he will be spit upon, flogged, and murdered in Jerusalem (Mark 10:32-34), James and John approach Jesus





with a special request: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (verse 37).

James and John are requesting special places of honor in his kingdom. They see their association with Jesus as a means to future status, power, and influence. As a result, they are blind to Jesus’ true purpose.

At this point you could be thinking, How can they have been so blind and power hungry? But if we ask the question “What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?” we just may see ourselves in the actions of Jesus’ disciples. Aren’t we like James and John?

A number of years ago, I moved from Chicago to Indianapolis to take a ministry position. After joining my new team, I began to struggle with the fact that I didn’t have a particular position of influence on this team.

Subconsciously, I really believed that if I had a position of greater influence, I would experience a greater sense of worth and satisfaction. Ironically, my “Christian service” was a means to that end. I was searching for life apart from Christ in status and influence. Turns out, I’m exactly like James and John.

Finally, imagine you are reading through the book of Jeremiah and come across these words:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this;
 be shocked, be utterly desolate,
 declares the LORD,
 for my people have committed two evils:
 they have forsaken me,
 the fountain of living waters,
 and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
 broken cisterns that can hold no water.
 (Jeremiah 2:12-13)

Idols offer a counterfeit to aspects of God's identity and character. Idols represent the broken cisterns we trade for fountains of living water

The people of Israel were dependent on rainfall for their survival. They frequently collected rainwater underground in cisterns hewn of rock. To the big, beefy, agrarian farmer who lived in this drought-filled land, this imagery of broken cisterns would have spoken volumes. The prophet claims that God's people had exchanged a flowing fountain for broken cisterns that were incapable of holding life-giving water.

As we reflect on this passage, we want to ask ourselves the question "What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?" Framed this way, we immediately recognize that the passage aptly describes a problem endemic to our lives. When we seek life in Internet pornography, for example, we trade a fountain for broken cisterns. Or when we seek life in control, we trade a fountain for broken cisterns. Or when we seek life in romance, we trade a fountain for broken cisterns. Or when we seek life in performance . . . You get the idea.

One of the broken cisterns in my life is a craving for the approval of others. I remember a situation during my graduate program in which the academic dean of the school where I was studying concluded that I had acted disrespectfully toward one of the school's administrators. I remember the fear I felt as I anticipated meeting with the dean. I couldn't read or concentrate on my Bible that morning; it was like trying to read how to turn my seat cushion into a flotation device while my plane plummeted toward earth. It became clear to me what was going on in my heart when the following thought crashed into my mind: I have to have his approval. It doesn't matter what it takes—I have to have his approval. The meeting went well (I didn't curl up in a fetal position or anything), and the misunderstanding was resolved. But the events brought to my painful awareness how I look for life more in the approval of people than in the approval of God through Christ.

When we look for life apart from Christ in relationships, success, control, influence, sexual fantasy, and so on, we trade a flowing fountain for broken cisterns that cannot hold water. What are the broken cisterns in your life? How are you tempted to make life work apart from Christ?

That's where the Jeremiah passage wants to take us. And asking the question "What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?" opens the door to go there.

Uncovering the Sin beneath the Sin

One evening, in late December, I was driving home from my office in Indianapolis. In order to get to my apartment, I had to drive past a large mall. Around Christmas, the traffic near this mall is unbearable. This particular evening it took thirty minutes to go less than a mile. As the minutes ticked away, I became increasingly agitated. (I like the word *agitated* better than *enraged*, *irate*, *fuming*, *irked*, or *livid* . . . all of which I was, of course). But then, in a moment of boiling anger, I smashed the steering wheel as hard as I could with my fist. I eventually made it home, but I arrived with a sore fist and a guilty conscience.

Let's imagine that the following morning I'm reading Ephesians, determined to consider what Scripture has to say regarding my brokenness. Reading Paul's injunctions in chapter 4 to put away anger, I might conclude that Scripture is revealing to me that I have a problem with anger. (Of course, this was already clear to me, and to many around me, without my even opening my Bible.) But I cannot stop here as if anger were the ultimate source of my sin. It's not. I need to dig deeper to get at what's causing the anger. I need to ask, "What is the sin beneath the sin of anger?"

Although my anger arises in a variety of circumstances, I've noticed an important thread running through my episodic bouts of rage . . . I mean, agitation. My anger is often triggered by delays, unplanned interruptions, schedule changes, traffic jams, malfunctioning computers, people not following systems I create or doing what I want them to do. The root of much of my anger, in other words, is a longing to control my world. When I feel out of control—in a traffic jam, for example—I get angry because someone's messing with my world! While control may not be the only source of my anger, it's a significant one.

We tend to focus on the surface sins (the fruit) without considering what's beneath the surface (the root). To hear the music of the gospel, we must go deeper, considering both the fruit and the root of our sin.

As you prayerfully consider the root of specific sins in your life, the biblical category of idolatry can be particularly helpful. Idolatry is one of the major themes in the Bible, as evidenced by the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). When we think of idolatry, particularly in the Bible, we picture it in terms of bowing down to a carved statue of some kind (see Ezekiel 14:1-8). But just because we haven’t prostrated ourselves before a statue of Zeus or the Statue of Liberty doesn’t mean we’re innocent of idolatry. An idol can be anything we believe we need, apart from Christ, to fulfill us. By this definition, we all dabble more than a little in idolatry.

Because we’ve turned away from God, we experience alienation, inadequacy, and deficiency. Idolatry takes place any time the functional trust of our heart shifts to someone or something other than Christ. I like how one writer puts it: “We serve, love, desire, trust, fear, and worship other things apart from God to give us love, joy, peace, freedom, status, identity, control, happiness, security, fulfillment, health, pleasure, significance, acceptance, and respect. Sometimes our idols are obviously wrong. However, the things we desire are often good in themselves, such as having well-behaved children. . . . Even good things become idols when they start to rule our lives.”²

Idols offer a counterfeit to aspects of God’s identity and character. Idols represent the broken cisterns we trade for fountains of living water (Jeremiah 2:13). As a result, we shouldn’t think about idolatry as one sin among others but rather as a root sin that expresses itself in a variety of ways.

Scripture helps me to see that my problem is much deeper than occasional outbursts of anger. Control represents an idol in my life—an idol

that I believe will give me security and peace. Although I would never explicitly say this, in my heart I believe there is more life to be found in having my puny little world in control than there is to be found in Christ. Ugly, isn’t it? But that’s the truth of the gospel in my life. That’s the Word digging down, judging “the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12), and distinguishing between deficient behavior (anger) and a deficient heart (idolatry).

We locate idols in our lives by prayerfully examining our fears, trusts, and desires and considering what these reveal about where we believe real life can be found.³

Portraits of a Beautiful Savior

Because Scripture has a redemptive purpose, it does not leave us to morosely sing along to the dirge of sin but instead leads us on to the melody of the gospel (that is, all that God is for us in Christ). And so there is a second question we need to ask as we seek to respond to God through his Word. After we have asked, “What does this reveal about my brokenness that requires the work of Christ?” we next must ask, “How does this passage point me to Christ?”

In a debate with Jewish leaders over his authority and identity, Jesus offered the following indictment: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). Jesus was not talking with theological liberals who were perverting and subverting the Scripture; he was talking with people who revered the Scriptures. And though they carefully studied the Scriptures, Jesus claimed that they had completely missed the meaning of the Scriptures. They had come to believe

that Scripture’s role in redemption lies in detailing for us the commands and demands of God, and they had missed how Scripture points us to the Christ.

Again, note the difference in the following examples when we come to the text not simply looking for dance steps but asking, “How does this passage point me to Christ?”

Matthew 4 records the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. If we read this passage simply asking, “What does this passage exhort me to do?” we will not hear the music of the gospel. We may instead reduce the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness to a lesson about how to avoid temptation. (“So when Satan asks if you would like to rule all the kingdoms of the world, remember to say no, like Jesus did.”) While this story does have implications for how we handle temptation, it is crucial that we consider how it points us to Christ.

Matthew is drawing a parallel between the experience of the people of Israel and that of Jesus. Both were led





into the wilderness. Both were tested. But what happened when Israel was led into the wilderness? Israel failed. And what happened when Jesus was led into the wilderness? He remained faithful.

In what sense does this passage offer good news? Like Israel, we also are tempted. And like Israel, we also fail. We fail all the time, as a matter of fact. And so we need someone who can live a perfect life on our behalf. The great news of the gospel is that Jesus has done that. In this passage, therefore, Jesus is not primarily our example, showing us how to face temptation. He is our hero, who lived in perfect obedience and who credits us with his righteousness.

In a sermon on this passage, Jason Gibson sums this point up well:

If Jesus had failed in the desert we could not have been put right with God, for there would have been

no perfect sacrifice to take away sin forever, and no perfect life to be credited to our account. In the Gospel God treats Jesus as if He had failed and treats us as if we had never failed. In the Gospel Jesus is punished as if He had disobeyed God, and we are declared to be perfect as if we had never disobeyed God! Matthew's Gospel is about just that—the Gospel! Which is about Jesus, God's final obedient Son. The wait for an obedient son is over. He has arrived. Jesus is the new and better Adam, the true Israel who has defeated the devil and won back for rebels the paradise lost. And this is the Gospel that is available to all of us who admit our weakness and inability to overcome Satan, and trust in what Jesus has done for us on our behalf.⁴

By asking how this passage points us to Christ, we begin to hear music we might otherwise have missed.

By asking how this passage points us to Christ, we begin to hear music we might otherwise have missed.

Consider again the following passage in Hebrews 4: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

We live in a world marked by suffering. Parents married twenty years file for divorce. A friend’s life is tragically ended by an auto accident. A parent contracts a debilitating illness. As believers, we sometimes find ourselves despairing in response to these circumstances. It’s easy to feel as if no one understands or as if other believers don’t have to deal with what we’re dealing with. But notice how the writer of Hebrews points our hearts to Christ as one who truly understands.

The writer calls us to reflect upon Jesus’ final hours: he was betrayed by a friend, abandoned by his disciples, endured unimaginable physical and emotional abuse, and experienced an excruciating death. He understands abandonment, loneliness, rejection, shame, and sorrow because he experienced these things himself. He can identify with the entire range of our painful experiences. Not only can we find understanding in Christ, but also, when we draw near to him, we find mercy and grace to help us in our need. And so, as we ask the question “How does this passage point me to Christ and the gospel?” we see that the good news is that we have a Savior who understands suffering and pain because he has experienced them. He is not distant from us nor has he abandoned us in our pain, but he is right there with us in the midst of it.

Some years ago I went through a difficult time emotionally. Whatever the source, I was constantly drained and could never seem to get to sleep at night. Of course, the less you sleep, the weirder you get. And the weirder you get, the more you find yourself staring at the ceiling at night wondering what in the world’s wrong with you. I thought I’d never feel normal again. I would try to describe to my friends what I was feeling, and yet, as much as they cared, it was clear they really didn’t understand what was going on inside me. I distinctly remember the hope this passage gave me as I came to God in prayer, knowing that Christ understood what I

was experiencing and would provide the grace I needed to get through it.

Finally, we will explore an unlikely place to encounter the music of the gospel: the book of Hosea. (Contrary to popular opinion, the Old Testament prophets really dug this music.) Here is a prophetic message delivered by Hosea to the northern kingdom shortly before it was destroyed by the Assyrian army in 722 b.c. Although there would be no deliverance for the northern kingdom from the Assyrians (Hosea 13:16), Hosea’s final message offers hope to a future generation:

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God,
for you have stumbled because of your iniquity.
Take with you words
and return to the LORD;
say to him,
“Take away all iniquity;
accept what is good,
and we will pay with bulls
the vows of our lips.
Assyria shall not save us;
we will not ride on horses;
and we will say no more, ‘Our God,’
to the work of our hands.
In you the orphan finds mercy.”

I will heal their apostasy;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them.
I will be like the dew to Israel;
he shall blossom like the lily;
he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon;
his shoots shall spread out;
his beauty shall be like the olive,
and his fragrance like Lebanon.
They shall return and dwell beneath my shadow;
they shall flourish like the grain;
they shall blossom like the vine;

their fame shall be like the
wine of Lebanon.

O Ephraim, what have I to do
with idols?

It is I who answer and look
after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress;
from me comes your fruit.
(Hosea 14:1-8)

In this chapter we see a beautiful picture of the gospel. Although we encounter no explicit reference to Jesus, this chapter indirectly points us to the good news that we find in Christ. God's people are invited to "return" to him (verse 1). All they can bring are "words" of repentance and faith (verses 2-3). In response, God promises to heal them (verse 4), love them freely (verse 4), and generously provide for their needs (verses 5-8). Notice the imagery God uses to describe what he will do for them. God will be like "dew" so that they will blossom like flowering lilies, beautiful olive trees, flourishing grain, and blossoming vines. Although today this imagery is lost on all but poetry and lit majors, it would have been music to the original listeners of this message.

To understand the significance of God's promise in this passage, it helps to understand the broader message of Hosea. God's people had abandoned him for the foreign and false god Baal. Things were so bad that God instructed the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute as a kind of living parable of the nation's spiritual adultery (Hosea 1—3).

We may wonder what the Israelites found attractive about Baal. That's simple: Baal was a fertility God. By participating in Baal worship, the people hoped to bring greater fruitfulness to their crops and increase their gross national product. (And with Baal being a fertility god, sex would have been a part of his worship—

definitely an added attraction.) What's striking about the message is that God describes the future blessing of his people in the very terms in which they had abandoned him—that is, fruitfulness. Notice the tender invitation in 14:8:

O Ephraim, what have I to do
with idols?

It is I who answer and look
after you.

I am like an evergreen cypress;
from me comes your fruit.

The point of the communication: God invites his people to find what they are searching for in him.

If one were to summarize the theological message of Hosea 14, it would be something like this: God invites us—those in need of mercy—to return to him with a broken and contrite heart, seeking his forgiveness and trusting in him alone. In response, he promises to be our all-sufficient source. A clearer picture of the gospel would be hard to find. In the gospel, Christ offers himself to us not merely as a sacrifice for sin but as the all-satisfying source for which our hearts most deeply long.⁵

You may be thinking, I would never have seen these things in Hosea. That's okay for now. In order to see how Scripture exposes our brokenness and points us to Christ, we need to continue to grow as readers of Scripture.⁶ A good commentary on Hosea (or any other biblical book you're studying) can provide pertinent information you may be lacking.

Clarifying a Potential Misunderstanding

My claim that Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, exposes our brokenness and points us to Christ and the gospel may raise a nagging question:



Am I suggesting that every passage of the Bible somehow proclaims Jesus? Or in other words, are we talking about looking for Jesus in places where he cannot be found?

A young boy was once asked in Sunday school, “What is small, brown, furry, and has a tail?”

The child thought for a minute and said, “It sounds like a squirrel, but I’ll say Jesus!”

This is *not* what we’re talking about. We are not looking to find Jesus in every passage of Scripture. Nor are we suggesting that anyone ignore the original meaning of the passage. What we are talking about is reading all of Scripture as a witness to Jesus (see Luke 24:25-27; John 5:39). All the individual stories in the Bible tell a larger story that centers on the person and work of Christ.⁷

We do not attempt to *find* Christ in every text but rather to discover how every text relates to Christ and his redemptive work.⁸ This involves both carefully studying the passage in its original context and relating it to the larger story of Scripture.

In his book *The Ancient Love Song*, Charles Drew notes that Scripture points us to Christ in a variety of ways.⁹

- The Law (especially portions of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) anticipates Christ by exposing our hearts and persuading us of our need for a Savior.
- At a broader level, the failures of specific Old Testament characters (for example, the repeated failures of God’s people to trust him and follow his law) also point indirectly to our need for a Savior.
- The promises scattered throughout the Old Testament (especially prophetic books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) anticipate Christ by kindling a longing at several levels that only Jesus can ultimately fulfill. For example, God’s repeated promise to dwell with his people (Leviticus 26:11-12; Ezekiel 37:26-28) comes most clearly to fruition in the incarnation of God’s Son (“The Word become flesh and dwelt among us,” John 1:14) and the future kingdom of Christ (Revelation 21:3).
- Wisdom literature (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and so on) compels us to look to Christ for meaning and for the ability to live wisely (see Colossians 2:3).
- The psalmists and prophets sometimes spoke with

the voice of Christ, anticipating his suffering (the Cross) and exaltation (the Resurrection).

- Particular Old Testament offices (prophet, priest, and king) foreshadow Christ’s redemptive work. They invite us to look for a prophet who is greater than Moses, a priest who is greater than Aaron, and a king who is greater than David.
- Certain Old Testament rituals, such as the Passover (Exodus 12), foreshadow God’s redemption of his people through the Cross.

In the New Testament we encounter explicit proclamation of Jesus:

- The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) introduce us to Jesus Christ and his ministry on earth, culminating in his death, burial, and resurrection.
- The Epistles (Romans, Galatians, and so forth) offer sustained theological reflection on the significance of the person and work of Christ for the church.
- Revelation gives us a window into the future glory of Christ as he brings in his heavenly kingdom.

And so the way Scripture points us to Christ in Genesis differs significantly from the way Scripture points us to Christ in the Gospel of John. What I am briefly outlining in this essay is a vision for a Christ-centered (or gospel-centered) approach to reading Scripture.¹⁰

Hearing the Music: An Example from Ephesians

We’ve been looking at how, in order to hear the music of the gospel, we need to consider *how a passage exposes our brokenness* and *how it points to Christ*. Having looked at these elements separately, let’s put them together by considering one final example from Ephesians in some detail.

Imagine you are studying Ephesians 4:25—5:2.

Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good

You can't fake that. The music of the gospel lowers the decibel level of the criticism and mutes the inner voices of defensiveness.

for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

You might begin by reflecting on the context of this passage. It comes in the second half of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. He has just finished describing God's provision for growth in and through the church: God has given the believers spiritual gifts in order to build up the church for the glory of Christ. In 4:1 Paul exhorts his readers to live in a manner worthy of their calling. In 4:17 we find this same exhortation stated negatively: Do not live as the Gentiles live. In 4:25—5:2 Paul begins to describe how their lives will look different as they live out their new identity.

You, being a biblical savant, were able to glean all this in minutes, allowing you leisurely time to make some observations about the passage. You might note that it is full of commands. In addition, there are numerous contrasts (falsehood versus truth, stealing versus sharing, corrupt talk versus words of encouragement, and so on). These contrasts seem to play a central role in the passage. Along the way, you might explore the meaning of key terms in this passage using a Bible dictionary. You might also consult a commentary. (A study Bible is essentially a commentary, only not as exhaustive. A commentary is the next step up in study notes. *The NIV Application Commentary* is a good place to start when you're ready for the upgrade.)

But the real difference comes as we think about how to apply this passage to our lives. If we come to the Bible seeking

from it a catalog of commendable Christian behaviors, we'll see only the dance steps. And this passage most certainly contains dance steps—both steps to avoid (lying, anger, stealing, and so on) and steps to follow (speaking truth, sharing, building up others through our speech). It's a biblical Riverdance. In a small-group Bible study, we might discuss in detail what some of these steps look like. For example, we might identify instances of corrupt speech in our lives and talk about what it would look like to encourage one another. We might conclude the study by reminding the group to apply these things to their lives and to consider how they might speak and treat each other differently. As they say, "It's all good," but the problem with this approach is that it bypasses the music that motivates the dance.

A Christ-centered approach to applying this passage differs not because it ignores the dance steps but rather because it searches for the music. At this point we want to ask the first question I introduced in this article: "What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?" On one level, the answer might seem obvious. We can find a whole list of sinful behaviors in this passage. However, to see how this describes our brokenness, we're going to have to dig deeper.

To do so, it may be helpful to ask, "What do all the sinful behaviors listed in 4:25—5:2 have in common?" In clustering the behaviors, it seems that Paul was attempting to address the various forms of self-centeredness that destroy relationships. Moreover, it seems Paul was not merely interested in restraining outward expressions of sinful behavior but was actually looking for inward transformation. Forgiveness, after all, is a change of heart, not something on a to-do list. In Ephesians 5:2 our self-centeredness seems all the more . . . well, self-centered when contrasted with Christ's self-sacrifice. In short, what we discover is that our problem is deeper than the need for moral reformation. What we need is a Savior.

In this passage we encounter not only portraits of our brokenness but also portraits of God's redemptive work. Paul reminds us of the forgiveness we've experienced in Christ at the cost of his life. He is not merely giving us an example to follow but he is also pointing us to the music that motivates the dance. We are to forgive as Christ forgave us (4:32). We are to love as God loved us (5:1-2). But how do we do this? By richly experiencing God's love and forgiveness.



Paul ends the first half of Ephesians by praying that in the deepest recesses of our being we would have power from the Holy Spirit to know how wide, how high, how deep, and how long is the love of God in Christ and that we would be filled with the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:14-21). In essence, Paul is praying that God's Spirit would enable us to hear the music of the gospel. It is only as we hear this music that we can forgive as we have been forgiven and love as God loves us.

An example may make this a little more concrete. Imagine two people. They are both Christians and they are both in situations where they are being criticized.

One of them is able to listen and sort through the criticism, admitting to what is true and patiently responding to what she feels to be unfair. By her response, you can tell that the criticism she's receiving is like a prick in the finger. And that's because there's a security flowing out of a deep experience of God's love and grace. You can't fake that. The music of the

gospel lowers the decibel level of the criticism and mutes the inner voices of defensiveness.

The other Christian faces the same kind of criticism yet he's consumed with anger. He hates criticism and so he either shifts the blame to anything or anyone other than himself or he spirals into complete and utter self-loathing. He's filled to the brim with the rage and anger that Ephesians 4 tells us to get rid of. It's clear that what he's experiencing is not a prick in the finger but more a meat cleaver in the heart. Why? Because he is not believing the truth of the gospel. He is not experiencing the riches of God's love, forgiveness, and acceptance through Jesus Christ, and his reaction makes this abundantly clear.

The Christ-centered point of Ephesians 4 is clear: if you know how richly you are loved by Christ, then criticism is more like a prick in the finger than a knife wound to the heart. (With that, I'll try to refrain from using any more graphically violent metaphors.)

Gospel-Centered Living

If we were to ask a group of Christians, “What was your greatest need prior to your conversion?” I imagine they would all answer, “The gospel.”¹¹ However, if we were to ask that same group, “What is your greatest need following your conversion?” we would elicit a wide variety of answers.

I am suggesting that the answer remains unchanged following our conversion. We still need the gospel. We still need to humbly lay bare the roots of our sin. We must continue to acknowledge our inadequacy and impotence to live righteously before God. And we must continue to trust wholly in the sufficiency of Christ—his forgiveness, empowerment, and promises.

This is the process we went through when we came to faith, and it is the way we continue to live out our faith. “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (Colossians 2:6). As Tim Keller points out, “The gospel is not just the ‘A-B-C’ but the ‘A-to-Z’ of the Christian life. The gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom, but is the way to address every problem and is the way to grow at every step.”¹²

That the gospel remains central to our lives as believers has vast implications for how we live and minister to others. As John Piper explains,

When believers know and love and live on the meat of the gospel, we will be so gospel-filled and gospel-shaped and gospel-dependent and gospel-driven and gospel-hoping and gospel-joyful that no one will need to tell us why we need to share the gospel or how to share the gospel. We will be so thankful and so desperately, day-by-day dependent on the gospel for our own hope of eternal life, and our own sanity, and our own stability, and our own marriages or singleness, that it will be impossible not to know that people need the gospel and why they need it and how it relates to their biggest needs—because we know we need it, and why we need it, and how it meets our biggest needs day by day.¹³

The gospel should shape the way we deal with failure, the way we grow, the way we react to disappointment, and so forth. Take, for example, my anger problem. Until what Christ offers in the gospel becomes more satisfying to me than the false sense of life I get from control, anger will dominate my life. The gospel gives me the ability to receive criticism, because my acceptance before God does not depend on how I perform. The gospel frees me from the need to be “right,” because Christ has paid for my failure. The gospel frees me truly to love

others, because my worth is not dependent on their approval. The gospel frees me to take risks, because my worth does not depend upon my successes but on the success of Christ.

The gospel should shape not only the way we read and apply the Bible in our own life but also the way we teach it to others. For example, as small-group leaders, our goal is not merely to teach people dance steps but to turn up the music of the gospel. The key to leading an effective small group is asking the right questions, especially questions that target the heart.

Of the wide variety of questions you might ask in a small group, there are two kinds of questions specifically designed to turn up the music.

First, we need to ask *questions that surface the brokenness in others’ lives that requires the gospel*. We want people to see how their wrong behaviors are rooted in heart resistance to Christ. This is not always easy to do. Sometimes I’ve written questions that I’ve never asked because I was afraid of what people in my small group might think of me.

Second, we need to ask *questions that point our group members to the beauty and sufficiency of Christ*. When people hear the music, you’ll be able to see it in their eyes. A small group of six couples I lead spent several months studying the book of Hosea together. I distinctly remember several conversations in which there were tears in group members’ eyes as the gospel came to life for them in Hosea.

We were created to know God—our hearts were made to respond to the music of the gospel. There is nothing more beautiful than a life gracefully responding to the rhythm of the gospel, and there is nothing as painful to watch as someone just imitating dance steps. As we allow Scripture to expose our brokenness and point us to our Savior, it functions as it was intended: as a speaker amplifying the music of the gospel. And as we communicate the Scripture in a Christ-centered way, others will begin to hear the music as well.

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Resources

Books:

- Bright, Bill. *Transferable Concepts* (www.transferableconcepts.org). Transferable concept 2, “How You Can Experience God’s Love and Forgiveness.”
- Drew, Charles D. *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000.
- Mahaney, C. J. *Living the Cross-Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2006.
- Piper, John. *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004.
- Storms, Sam. *Pleasures Evermore: The Life-Changing Power of Enjoying God*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2000.
- Williams, Neil H. *Gospel Transformation*. 2d ed. Jenkintown, PA: World Harvest Mission, 2006. Available through World Harvest Mission (www.whm.org).

Web:

www.themusicandthedance.com
 ibs.campuscrusadeforchrist.com

Notes

- ¹ This illustration was developed by Larry Kirk, pastor of Christ Community Church in Daytona Beach, Florida.
- ² Neil H. Williams, *Gospel Transformation*, 2d ed. (Jenkintown, PA: World Harvest Mission, 2006), 59.
- ³ For help with discerning areas of idolatry, see Williams, *Gospel Transformation*, 57–65.
- ⁴ Jason Gibson, “Finally . . . An Obedient Son!” Beginning with Moses, www.beginningwithmoses.org/briefings/matthew4v1to11.htm.
- ⁵ For more on this theme in Scripture, see John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God’s Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
- ⁶ To grow in our ability to hear the music of the gospel, we must grow in our ability to understand the Scriptures. A helpful starting point is Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000).
- ⁷ For a helpful overview of the storyline of the Bible, see Vaughn Roberts, *God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
- ⁸ See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 279.
- ⁹ Charles D. Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament*

(Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000).

- ¹⁰ For a helpful discussion of the rich variety of ways Scripture points us to Christ, see Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 269–328.
- ¹¹ “The gospel is the basic message that: ‘God made [Christ], who had no sin, to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (II Corinthians 5:21). [The gospel] tells us that we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than you ever dared to hope.” Tim Keller, *Fellowship Group Handbook*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
- ¹² Keller, *Fellowship Group Handbook*.
- ¹³ John Piper, “How Does the Gospel Save Believers? Part Two,” Desiring God, <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/98/081698.html>.



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