

Hearing the Music of the Gospel: Christ-Centered Bible Study

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The Music and the Dance

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 man sitting in a chair listening to music on his iPod. Rhythmically, he is tapping his foot, snapping his fingers and swaying to the beat of the song. His entire body moves in response to what his ears are hearing. It is obvious that he is enjoying himself.

A few minutes later, one of the deaf persons opens the door and enters the room. He carefully watches the person listening to the music and thinks to himself, “He seems to be having fun, I think I’ll try that too.” So, he sits down next to the man with the iPod and begins to imitate him. Awkwardly and haltingly at first, he tries to snap his fingers, tap his toes and move like the man next to him. After a little practice, he slowly begins to sway in time with the first man by watching and trying—mirroring his actions. Although he eventually gets better at keeping time, he concludes that it is not as much fun or as easy as it initially seemed. Indeed, it takes an enormous amount of effort to mimic the dance.

Imagine that a third person enters the room and watches this scene. What does he see? Two people apparently doing the same thing. Is there a difference? Absolutely! The first man hears the music and his actions are but a natural response to the music’s rhythm and melody. The second man is merely imitating the outward actions.

An important parallel exists to our Christian life. The “dance” represents the Christian life while the “music” represents the gospel. Sadly, we are often like the person in my story who tries to perform the dance steps without hearing the music. God’s heart is not simply to get us to dance but to get us to hear the music of the gospel—dancing reflexively flows from this. What follows in this article is a brief reflection on how to tune into the music of the gospel,² listening for its rhythm as you read the Scriptures.

Understanding the Redemptive Focus of Scripture

Often we look to the Bible seeing nothing more than a collection of ethical directives and moral imperatives instructing us in how to live. But to read Scripture this way is to reduce it to dance

¹ This illustration was developed by Larry Kirk, Pastor of Christ Community Church in Daytona Beach, Florida. I am indebted to Larry for helping me better understand and experience how the Scriptures point us to the music of the gospel.

² The term “gospel” literally means “good news.” In the New Testament, the gospel encompasses not only the forgiveness of sins but all that God has done for us in Christ (adoption, reconciliation, justification, etc.).

steps, the do's and don'ts of the Christian life, and 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.

Toward this end, the writer of Hebrews gives us a push us in the right direction. In chapter four, he urges his readers not to be hard-hearted and miss the “rest” God has provided in Christ (Heb. 4:1-11). He closes with the following statement about God’s Word: “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” (Heb. 4:12-13, ESV). Notice how he 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.

Several years ago I had a very stressful week prior to the start of major conference I was leading. A number of times, I found myself asking my wife’s forgiveness for being rude to her. However, in the back of my mind I really believed the problem was my circumstances: “If my life were not so stressful,” I told myself, “I would not 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 is in them. It was as if God’s Spirit shined his spotlight in my heart saying, “Your problem is not these circumstances. These circumstances merely revealed what was in your heart.” This is precisely what Scripture is intended to do – to reveal our brokenness that requires the work of Christ.

I realize that what I have said so far about the Scripture is not particularly upbeat and something you’d want to dance to. But that’s coming. The choreography of grace is indirect—it cannot be directly accessed; you must first waltz first through brokenness and repentance. Those who seek to move directly to the upbeat and eliminate the downbeat, destroy the tune entirely.

Scripture, graciously, does not merely leave us 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, ESV). The writer of Hebrews does not point us toward a program of behavior modification but to a *person*: the remedy to our brokenness not in corrective dance steps but in the person Christ.

Most scholars believe that the readers of Hebrews were Jewish Christians. 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 of Hebrews paints a portrait of one who fundamentally understands because, in his human nature, he has experienced the exact same temptations as they have. 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—namely, pointing our hearts to our Savior. We tend to limit this dimension of Scripture merely to those who are outside the Christian faith (i.e., 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. As believers, we are still tempted to make our lives work apart from Christ and often seek life apart from him in control, influence, approval, performance, or any number of alternatives. We, therefore, constantly need to be pointed back to the one in whom alone life can be found. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture does two things: (1) it exposes our brokenness and (2) points us to our savior.³ We will 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*?” If we read the Bible merely looking for dance steps (“What does this passage tell me to do?”), we will 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 our spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?”

Let’s look briefly at three examples. Imagine you were 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, ESV). In this passage James appears to criticize all attempts to plan for the future. If we start by asking, “What should I do?” (i.e., looking for dance steps), then we may attempt to identify situations in which planning for the future is wrong and situations in which is right; however, by doing this we may entirely miss James’ point. If we ask the question, “What does this reveal about my brokenness that requires the gospel?” then we are in a better position to discern James’ true purpose. Notice the reference to “boast” and “boasting” in v. 16. He is speaking to a prideful spirit of independence that says, “I am the master of my fate. I control my destiny.” James invites me to come to the Lord acknowledging my propensity to control my future and to live independently from him. I repent of my lack of faith in his goodness. Thus, the real dance step is not about planning. What I *hear* is Christ saying “Entrust your future to me” not merely “stop making boastful claims about your future you bragger.” This kind of trust requires a renovation of my soul.

Next, imagine you are reading through the Gospel of Mark. In chapter ten, you read about an incident that took place as Jesus and his disciples were making their final journey to Jerusalem where he would be crucified. Immediately after Jesus tells his disciples that he will be spit upon, flogged and murdered in Jerusalem (Mark 10:32-33), James and John approach Jesus with a special request: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in

³ This is not to suggest that the way Scripture exposes our sin and points us to our savior in Genesis is precisely same as the way it does it in Galatians. I will return to this point later.

your glory” (Mark 10:37). James and John were requesting special places of honor in his kingdom. They saw their association with Jesus as a means to future status, power and influence. As a result, they were blind to Jesus’ true purpose.

At this point, you may be thinking, “How can they have been so blind?” But if we each ask the question, “What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?” we may very well see *ourselves* in the actions of Jesus’ disciples. Are we not also like James and John? A number of years ago I moved from Chicago to Indianapolis to take a new 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. Like James and John, I was searching for life apart from Christ in status and influence.

Finally, imagine you were reading through the book of Jeremiah. In the second chapter, you came 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, ESV). The people of Israel were dependent on rainfall for their survival. They frequently collected rain water underground in cisterns hewn of rock. For people who lived in a drought-filled land, this imagery would be startling. The prophet claims that God’s people exchanged a rich flowing, fresh fountain for leaky buckets that cannot even hold life-giving water.

As we reflect on this passage, we want to ask ourselves the question, “What does this passage reveal about our spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?” As we reflect on this question, we immediately recognize that this passage aptly describe our lives as well. When we seek life in internet pornography, we trade a fresh spring for leaky buckets. When we seek life in control, we trade a fresh spring for a leaky bucket. When we seek life in romance, we trade a fresh spring for a leaky bucket. When we seek life in performance, we trade a fresh spring for a leaky bucket. One of the leaky buckets in my life is the approval of others. I vividly remember a situation in my graduate program in which the academic dean of the school where I was studying (wrongly) concluded that I had acted disrespectfully toward one of the school’s administrators. I remember the fear I felt as I anticipated meeting the dean that morning. My heart was turbulent. Emotionally I felt like I was being carried in a river current from which I could not escape. I couldn’t even read my Bible that morning. The words on the page might as well have been Sanskrit. It became clear to me what was going on in my heart when the following thought pressed itself upon me: “I have to have his approval. It doesn’t matter what it takes. I have to have his approval.” Eventually the misunderstanding was resolved but this situation reminded me how I look for life in approval. Although I would never tell you this, I often live as if more life can be found in the leaky bucket of approval than God’s approval in Christ. When we look for life apart from Christ in relationships, success, control, influence, sexual fantasy, etc., we trade a fresh spring for leaky buckets that cannot hold any water. What are the leaky buckets in your life? How are you tempted to make life work apart from Christ? That’s

where the Scripture wants to take us, and simply asking the question “What does this text reveal about my brokenness” 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 could be unbearable. This particular evening it took thirty minutes to go less than one mile. As the minutes ticked away I became increasingly agitated. 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 arrived with a very sore first and a guilty conscience.

Let’s imagine the following morning that I was reading Ephesians determined to consider what Scripture reveals regarding my brokenness. Reading Paul’s injunctions in chapter four to “put away” anger, I might conclude that Scripture reveals that I have a problem with anger. (Of course, this was clear to me, and many around me, without evening opening my Bible.)

I cannot stop there. I must press deeper. I need to ask, “What the sin beneath the sin of anger?” Although my anger arises in a variety of circumstances, I have noticed an important thread through many of my episodes of anger. My anger is often triggered by delays, unplanned interruptions and schedule changes, traffic jams, malfunctioning computers, people not following systems I create, etc. At the root of much of my anger is a longing to “control” my world. When I feel out of control—for example, because of a traffic jam—I get angry. Control may not be the only source of my anger but it is a significant one.

We tend to focus on the surface sins (the fruit) and not consider what is 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, the biblical category of “idolatry” can be particularly illuminating. 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, ESV). We tend to think of “idolatry” merely in terms of bowing down to statutes carved from wood and stone; however, it is important to recognize that “idolatry” is not merely about worshipping wooden statutes (cf. Ezekiel 14:1-8). An idol can be anything we believe we need, apart from Christ, to fulfill us. Because we have turned away from God, we experience alienation, inadequacy and deficiency. Idolatry takes place anytime the functional trust of our heart shifts to someone or something other than Christ. One writer puts it well: “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.”⁴ Idols offer a counterfeit to aspects of God’s identity and character.⁵ Idols represent the leaky buckets we trade for fountains of living water (cf. Jeremiah 2:13).

⁴ Neil H. Williams, *Gospel Transformation*, 2d ed. (Jenkintown, P.A.: World Harvest Mission, 2006), 59.

⁵ As a result, we should not think about idolatry as one sin among others but as a root sin that expresses itself in a variety of ways.

Scripture helps me see that my problem is much deeper than occasional outbursts of anger. “Control” represents an idol in my life—an idol 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. 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.⁶

Portraits of a Beautiful Savior

Because Scripture has a redemptive purpose, it does not merely leave us exposed in our sin. It also points us to the music of the gospel (i.e., all that God is for us in Christ). Hence, 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 and the grace or ‘good news’ of the gospel?”

In a debate with Jewish leaders over his authority and identity, Jesus offers 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, ESV). Jesus was not talking with theological “liberals.” He was talking with the people who revered the Scriptures. Even though they carefully studied the Scriptures, Jesus claims that they completely missed the *meaning* of the Scriptures. They were looking for *life* in the wrong place. What was it that they missed? They had missed the redemptive purpose of Scripture: that they were designed to point us to Christ. They had come to believe that Scripture’s role in redemption was in detailing for us the commands and demands that God required while missing that Scripture’s role in redemption was in pointing 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 and the ‘good news’ of the gospel?” Two short examples may help make this question (“How does this passage point me to Christ and the ‘good news’ of the gospel?”) more concrete.

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 gospel. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness may be reduced to a lesson about how to avoid temptation. While this story has 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 Jesus. Both were led into the wilderness. Both were tested. What happened when Israel was led into the wilderness? Israel failed. What happened when Jesus was led into the wilderness? He remained faithful. We must remember that the Gospels proclaim “good news.” In what sense does this passage offer “good news”? Like Israel, we too have been tempted and fail. If we were honest, we fail more often than we care to admit. We need someone who can live a perfect life in our

⁶ For help with discerning areas of idolatry, see Williams, *Gospel Transformation*, 57-65.

place, on our behalf. And the great news of the Gospel is Jesus has done just that. Jesus, therefore, is not primarily our example in this passage. He is our hero. In a sermon on this passage, Jason Gibson sums this 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.⁷

By asking how this passage points us to Christ, we begin to hear music we might easily 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" (Heb. 4:14-16, ESV).

We live in a world marked by suffering and difficulty. Parents married twenty years file for a 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 like no one understands. Notice how the writer of Hebrews points our hearts to one who truly does understand, calling 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 deep sadness because he experienced these things himself. He can identify with the entire gamut of our painful experiences. Not only can we find understanding in Christ, but when we draw near to him we also find "mercy and grace to help in time of need." Thus, as we ask the question, "How does this passage point me to Christ and the 'good news' of the gospel?" we see that the "good news" is that we have a savior who understands suffering and pain because he has experienced them himself. Some years ago I went through a very difficult time emotionally. I felt constantly drained. I had difficulty sleeping at night. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever feel "normal" again. I would try to describe to my friends what I was feeling and, 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 extend grace to me.

Finally, we will explore an unlikely place to encounter the music of the gospel—a prophetic message delivered by the prophet Hosea to northern kingdom shortly before it was destroyed by the Assyrian army in 722 B.C. Although there will be no deliverance for the

⁷ Jason Gibson, "Finally . . . An Obedient Son." www.beginningwithmoses.org/briefings/matthew4v1to11.htm, accessed December 21, 2007.

northern kingdom from the Assyrians (Hosea 13:16), Hosea's final message offers hope to a future generation: ¹Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. ²Take 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. ³ 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." ⁴I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. ⁵I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; ⁶his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. ⁷They 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. ⁸O 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, ESV).

In this chapter we encounter 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.⁸ God's people are invited to "return" to him (v. 1). All they can bring are "words" of repentance and faith (vv. 2-3). In response God, promises to heal (v. 4), love them freely (v. 4) and generously provide for their needs (vv. 5-8). Notice the imagery the Hosea uses 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 this imagery is lost on us, it would be melodious music for them.

To understand the significance of God's promise, one must understand the broader message of Hosea. God's people abandoned him for "Baal." Things were so bad that God instructed the prophet Hosea to marry a prostitute as a kind of living parable of their spiritual idolatry (Hosea 1-3). We may wonder what the Israelites found attractive about Baal. It was really quite 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 produce. It is quite striking, therefore, that God describes the future blessing of his people in the very terms in which they abandoned him (i.e., fruitfulness). What they were seeking (and so much more) could be found only in him. Notice the tender invitation in v. 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." God invites his people to find what they are searching for him. If one were to summarize the theological message of Hosea 14, it would be something like this: *God invites us, as orphans in need of mercy, to return to him with a broken and contrite heart, seeking his forgiveness and trusting in his all-encompassing sufficiency. 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

⁸ Several gospel connections can be seen in this passage. First, we see this passage the brokenness that requires the gospel (i.e., our rebellion against God). Like Israel, we too have "stumbled" (v. 1) by embracing false hopes and false saviors. Second, we see continuity in the means by which we approach God through the gospel. Notice the "words" that the prophet gives them to bring to God (vv. 2-3): "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." This prayer express repentance from sin (take away our iniquity) and faith in God (we will no longer trust in Assyria). Finally, we see parallels to the gospel in restoration (v. 4) and blessing (vv. 5-8) God offers his people (with the greatest blessing is that God gives himself).

sacrifice for sin but also as the all satisfying treasure for which our hearts most deeply long.⁹ You may be thinking, “I would never have seen these things in Hosea.” That’s o.k. for now. In order to see how Scripture exposes our brokenness and points us to Christ, we need to continue grow as readers of Scripture.¹⁰ A good commentary on Hosea could help you answer some of these questions.

Clarifying a Potential Misunderstanding

My claim that from Genesis to Revelation Scripture exposes our brokenness and points us to Christ and gospel may raise a nagging question: Am I suggesting that the every passage of the Bible somehow proclaims Jesus? Are we talking about looking for Jesus in places 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!” Is this what we are doing? Certainly not! We are not talking about looking for Jesus in places he cannot be found. Nor or we talking about ignoring the “original meaning” of the passage. What we are talking about is following Jesus in reading all of Scripture as a witness to him (cf. John 5:39; Luke 24:25-27). All the individual stories in the Bible tell a larger story that centers on the person and work of Christ.¹¹ We do not attempt to *find* Christ in every text but to discover how every text *relates* to Christ and his redemptive work.¹² This involves both carefully studying the passage in its original context and then relating it to the larger story of Scripture.

In his book *The Ancient Love Song*, Charles Drew rightly notes that Scripture points us to Christ in a complex variety of ways.¹³ 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 (e.g., 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 like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.) 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 (e.g., Lev. 26:11-12; Ezekiel 37:26-28) comes to most clearly to fruition in the incarnation (“And the Word become flesh and dwelt among us,” John 1:14) and future kingdom of Christ (Rev. 21:3). Wisdom Literature (e.g., Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, etc.) compels us to look to Christ for meaning and for the ability to live wisely (cf. Col 2:3). The psalmists and prophets sometimes speak with the voice of Christ, anticipating his suffering (the cross) and exaltation (resurrection). Particular Old Testament

⁹ 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: Crossway, 2005).

¹⁰ There is no way to get around the fact that to grow in our ability to hear the music of the gospel, we must grow in our ability rightly to read the Scriptures. A helpful starting point would be reading Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2000).

¹¹ 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: InterVarsity, 2003).

¹² See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 279.

¹³ Charles D. Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2000).

offices (e.g., 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 like 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 to Jesus Christ and his ministry on earth culminating in his death, burial and resurrection. The epistles (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, etc.) offered sustained theological reflection on the significance of the person and work of Christ for the church. Revelation gives us a small window into to the future glory of Christ as he brings his heavenly kingdom. Thus, the way Scripture points us to Christ in Genesis differs significantly from the way Scripture points us to Christ and the Gospel of John. What I am briefly outlining in this essay is a vision for Christ-centered (or gospel-centered) approach to reading Scripture.¹⁴

Hearing the Music: An Example from Ephesians

What we've been saying, and hopefully you've been hearing, as that 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 considered both these elements separately, let's put them together by looking at one final example from Ephesians in more detail in order to envision what a gospel-centered / Christ-centered approach might look like.

Imagine that you are studying Ephesians 4:25-5:2.

²⁵Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸Let 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. ²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. ¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²And 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. This passage comes in the second half of Paul's letter. He has just finished describing God's provision for growth in and through the church: God has given them spiritual gifts in order to build up the church for the glory of Christ. In 4:1, Paul exhorts them to live in a manner worthy of their calling.

¹⁴ For a helpful discussion of the rich variety of ways Scripture points us to Christ, see Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 269-328. Chapell suggests that in the Bible we encounter (1) explicit reference to Christ (i.e., the Gospels), (2) "typological" reference to Christ (i.e., Old Testament offices, characters and rituals that foreshadow Christ) and (3) "contextual" reference to Christ when a passage is seen in the context of the entire story of God. This third category include passages that (a) predict the work of Christ, (b) prepare for the work of Christ, (c) reflect the work of Christ or (d) result from the work of Christ. See also Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2000), 170-186.

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.

Next, you might make observations about the passage. You might note that it is full of commands. In addition, there are numerous contrasts (falsehood vs. truth, stealing vs. sharing, corrupt talk vs. words of encouragement, etc.). 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.

But the real difference comes as we think about how to “apply” this passage to our lives. If we read the Bible as a collection of ethical directives, we may simply read this passage looking for dance steps. This passage certainly does contain a lot of dance steps—both steps to avoid (lying, anger, stealing, etc.) and steps to follow (speaking truth, sharing, building up through our speech). In a small group Bible study, we might discuss in detail what these steps look like. For example, we might identify examples of corrupt speech in our lives and talk about what it would look like to build others up. We might conclude by reminding our participants that we must imitate Christ and pray for each other. 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 earlier in this article: “What does this passage reveal about our spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?”

On one level, the answer may seem quite obvious. We can find a whole list of sinful behaviors in this passage; however, to see how this describes our brokenness, we must dig deeper. We may find it helpful to ask, “What do all the sinful behaviors listed in 4:25-5:2 have in common?” As we look at them together, it becomes clear that Paul is speaking about various patterns of self-centeredness that destroy relationships. Moreover, it is clear that Paul is not merely interested in restraining outward expressions of sinful behavior but he is looking for inward transformation that expresses itself in forgiveness. Our self-centeredness stands all the more brightly in contrast to Christ’s self-sacrifice (5:2). We need to see that our problem is deeper than the need for moral reformation. We need a savior.

In this passage we not only encounter portraits of our brokenness but also portraits of God’s redemptive work. The “music” in this passage is found in Eph. 4:32-5:2. Paul reminds us of the forgiveness we have 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 forgive us” (4:32). We are to love “as God loved us” (5:1-2). But how do we do this? The answer? 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 be filled with the fullness of God (Eph. 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 (Eph 4:32) and love as God loves us (Eph. 5:1-2).

An example may make this 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 they feel to be unfair. By their response you can tell that the criticism they are receiving is like a prick in the finger. Why? Because that Christian, believing in the truth of God, knows and experiences the “richness” he possesses in the Father’s love because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

The other Christian, however, faces the same kind criticism and yet they are consumed with anger. They hate criticism and so they shift the blame or spiral into self-loathing. They are full of the rage and anger that Ephesians 4 tells us to get rid of. It is clear that what they are experiencing is not a prick in the finger but more like a knife in the heart. Why? Because they are not believing the truth about how incredibly rich they are in the love of God through Jesus Christ. The “Christ-centered” point of Ephesians 4 is clear: if you know how richly you are loved by Christ, then criticism is more like prick in the finger than a stab in the heart.

Conclusion: Gospel-Centered Living

If we were to ask a group of Christians, “What was your greatest need prior to your conversation?” they would all answer, “the gospel!”¹⁵ However, if we were to ask that same group, “What is your greatest need following your conversation?” we would elicit a wide variety of answers. I am suggesting that the answer remains unchanged following our conversion: we still need the gospel. 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.”¹⁶ 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,

[W]hen 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

¹⁵ “The gospel means ‘good news’. It 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 says that we are so sinful, lost, and helpless that only the life and death of the Son of God can save us. But it also says that those who trust in Christ’s works instead of their own efforts are now *‘holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation’* (Colossians 1:22-23). . . . [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—at the same time. In fact, if the gospel is true, the *more* you see your sin, the more certain you are that you were saved by sheer grace and the more precious and electrifying that grace is to you.” Tim Keller, *Fellowship Group Handbook*, Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

¹⁶ Tim Keller, *Fellowship Group Handbook*.

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.¹⁷

The gospel should shape the way we deal with failure, the way we grow, the way we deal with disappointment, etc. Returning to my anger, until what Christ offers in the gospel becomes more satisfying to me than the false sense of life I get from control, anger will continue to dominate my life.¹⁸ 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 the success of Christ.

The gospel should shape not only the way we read and apply the Bible in my own life but also the way we teach it to others. For example, as a small group leader our goal is not merely to teach people dance steps but to turn up the music of the gospel. The key to an effective small group is asking the right questions—especially questions that target the heart. There are two kinds of questions we need to ask to turn up the music.¹⁹ First, we need to ask questions that surface the brokenness in their 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 have written questions that I never asked because I was afraid of what people in my small group might think of me. Second, we want to ask questions that point our group members to beauty and sufficiency of Christ and the gospel. When people hear the music, you will be able to see it 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 their eyes as the gospel came to life for them in Hosea.

Our hearts were made to respond to the music—the music of the gospel. There is nothing more beautiful than a life gracefully responding to the rhythm of the gospel, and nothing as awkward and painful to watch as someone just imitating dance steps. As we allow Scriptures 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 gospel-centered way, others will begin to hear the music as well.

Resources

The following will help you learn how to hear the music of the gospel:

Neil H. Williams, *Gospel Transformation*, 2d ed. (Jenkintown, P.A.: World Harvest Mission, 2006). [*This workbook contains 36 lessons that will help you understand how to apply the gospel to you life. It's a great place to start. Available through World Harvest Mission, www.whm.org.*]

Bill Bright, *Transferable Concepts* (www.transferableconcepts.org). [*Transferable Concept #2, “How You Can Experience God’s Love and Forgiveness” is about experiencing the gospel.*]

¹⁷ John Piper, “How Does the Gospel Save Believers? Part Two” (August 16, 1998), sermon manuscript. <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/sermons/98/081698.html>

¹⁸ Need info about the gospel-centered book on anger.

¹⁹ In a small group lesson, we will use a wide variety of questions. I am not suggesting these are the only questions we will ask but simply that these two kinds of questions need to be included.

C. J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing* (Multnomah). [*Good at helping us re-think the Gospel, which is something we don't graduate from. Practical. Short.*]

John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). [*Great at pointing us to beauty of Christ.*]

Charles D. Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2000). [*Shows how the Old Testament points to Christ.*]

Sam Storms *Pleasures Evermore: The Life-Changing Power of Enjoying God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000).

Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* (Grand Rapids: ZonderKidz, 2007). [*Although this is a children's book, its simple profundity has made it a classic. Swallow your pride and give it a go. It relates all the stories of Scripture to the larger story that centers on Christ.*]

Jerry Bridges, *The Gospel for Real Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2003).

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