

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Kings, Lecture 12

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Methods of Preaching Historical Narratives

On Preaching Historical Narratives

I think we would all agree that if we take a historical narrative text for a sermon, we really ought to do more than simply retell the story in the sermon. I think a sermon should do more than simply retell, but the question is: How do you formulate the “more”? What is the more? Certainly our desire is to preach the word. What I mean by that is our desire would be to convey the message that God has placed in the portion of Scripture we are handling. We don’t want a text to become a pretext for our own ideas or theories or opinions, but we want to proclaim the word that God has placed in that text. But the question is how do we go about doing that when we preach on a historical text.

I think in a very real sense it’s much more difficult to preach on a historical text, depending on how you go about it, than it is on a didactic text or other kinds of texts. Historical texts deal with people and situations that are long removed in time and cultural context from our own situation today. So that you all can hear it said that the message has to be contextualized or translated into our situation from the situation in which it is described in the narratives of Scripture.

But the question still is: How do we do that? How do you bridge that historical gap? You’re dealing with people that lived in very different times and circumstances than we are. Over the centuries there have been various methods used to try to make those ancient texts relevant. In the time prior to the Protestant Reformation it was common to utilize the allegorical method. You probably are familiar with that method. But the method really spiritualizes these stories so that the facts of the narratives really don’t have a great deal of importance as historical facts. Instead of that they become bearers of deeper spiritual truths so that the facts themselves aren’t of a great deal of importance, but the spiritual truths that they carry are the things that are focused on and viewed as

important.

Example of Allegorical Method: Genesis 24

Let me illustrate that. I'll illustrate it here initially from Genesis 24, which isn't one of the texts we're looking at, but it's a historical narrative. Genesis 24 is the story where Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. If you look at Genesis 24 with that story and you use an allegorical method to determine what the significance or meaning of that story is for us today, that method and the practitioners of that method have said that Isaac is a figure for Christ who marries his bride, the church, represented by Rebekah. The servant of Abraham who secures Rebekah for Isaac is the preacher who, by proclaiming God's word, is to bring members of the church to Christ. Rebekah's daily practice of going to the well to draw water means that the church must live by daily drawing from the well of God's word. The camels who cannot draw water themselves must be given water, remember that's what Rebekah did, are those who cannot themselves use God's word but must be instructed in it. And that can go on and on. So you take details of the story and you give them a higher meaning of some sort of spiritual significance, and you say then that is what we're to get from reading these narratives.

Now, I think that kind of approach really has little to do with exegesis of Scripture, that is, reading out of Scripture what God has placed in it for us to understand and to benefit from. It really is what's called "eisogesis," reading into Scripture these things. The things that are read into may be truths that can be read elsewhere in Scripture, but you're really placing them on that text and not letting the text speak its own message. So when you use an allegorical method with historical narratives to get meaning or significance, what you really do is cause the facts of the narrative to cease to be important in and of themselves. They simply become the bearers of some deeper, or higher, spiritual significance, but in and of themselves they have little or no significance. So I think that really is an unacceptable method; it doesn't do justice to the message God has given us in these texts of Scripture.

Exemplaristic Preaching Versus Redemptive-Historical Preaching

Well, what's the alternative to that? Some years ago there was a debate in the Netherlands about this question among theologians: about how to handle historical narratives in preaching. In that debate you had what was termed "exemplaristic preaching" on the one hand, that is using historical narratives to give us examples of how we should live. Exemplaristic, or illustrative, preaching on the one hand, and that was set over against what was termed "redemptive-historical preaching." So those two terms represent two other approaches to treatment of historical narratives in preaching. Illustrative, or exemplaristic, on the one hand, and redemptive historical preaching on the other. Exemplaristic preaching is preaching in which the stories of the Bible are proclaimed as containing examples of how we today should or should not act. And in that type of an approach you would look at the sins of various Old Testament personalities as examples of things we should not do. You'd look at the good things that you find some of these people in the Old Testament doing as examples we should follow and be like them. So that exemplaristic preaching basically follows the pattern: do as this one does and don't do as that one does.

Now again, if you go back to Genesis 24, Abraham's sending his servant to find a wife for Isaac and use that method, the exemplaristic method, you can find several ways in which some have advocated that the passage gives us examples. For instance, Abraham desired that his son Isaac would not marry a Canaanite woman but one that knew the Lord gives us an example. As parents today we should be concerned that our children do not marry unbelievers. Abraham was concerned Isaac not marry a Canaanite. He sends back to Haran to find someone who was a follower of the Lord.

Second, another element in the story that may serve as an example is that the servant prayed. Then he asked for a sign that the girl who comes to draw water and whom he asked for a drink would respond: I will give you a drink and I will also water your camels. And that was to be the sign to him that this was the girl. The example we

are to see in seeking a life's partner must be a matter of prayer, including that of parents for their children. It's a good biblical principle, there is no question. The question is: Is that the way we get that message from this passage of Scripture?

Here is a third illustration from this chapter: Rebekah is ready not only to give Abraham's servant a drink but also to water the camels. This teaches us that if our daughters desire to be good wives and mothers, they must not live just for themselves but be prepared to give themselves to others joyfully in service. So if you use this approach, you could find in the story of Isaac's marriage various lessons in the practice of godliness, particularly with respect to the matter of finding suitable mates for your children. Now that's an exemplaristic, illustrative approach to a narrative like Genesis 24.

Vannoy's Caution on Exemplaristic Preaching

Now some have objected to that type of preaching, to that method of trying to find meaning or significance, and the objections are based on several things. Among them is this first: There is something subjective and arbitrary in it. What I mean by that is the question that the interpreter faces if you're going to use that method is: What's to be taken as an example for us and what is not? Someone might say with respect to Genesis 24 that today a fellow or girl should ask for a sign from the Lord in order to know whether or not the fellow or girl he's thinking about is intended by the Lord to be his or her partner. That's what the servant did--he asked for a sign. Someone else might say rather emphatically to ask for such a special revelation or sign now that we possess the Scripture is really not proper. We've been given adequate revelation and guidelines for our lives. We don't need signs.

But the question is how do we decide what to use as exemplary for us? Then in addition, how do we determine whether to use it in a positive or negative sense? What is to be an example, and is it to be an example we are to follow or not to follow? That involves judgments, and those judgments don't arise out of the texts; you have to bring that from somewhere else. So there's something subjective and arbitrary there with the

method.

Second, this type of preaching tends to be what has been termed anthropocentric, which means man-centered, the Greek from *anthropos*. It's man-centered instead of theocentric, or God-centered. That type of preaching tends to be anthropocentric. Man is the center of focus and in the place of preaching Christ it becomes easy to preach dos and don'ts. Very easily this method falls into the danger of legalistic, moralistic sermonizing. So that in this approach you constantly measure yourself by various Bible characters-- people like Abraham, Jacob, Peter, Paul, or whomever. They're placed before us as examples we should follow in their positive traits and not follow in their negative traits. The objection to that is that in preaching that way, God himself may not come sufficiently into focus in his great works of revelation and redemption. It's anthropocentric instead of theocentric. You can treat passages in this way and see nothing of God and his mighty acts for his people. And isn't it really God in his mighty acts intervening in history in revelation and redemption, isn't it that that the narratives of the Bible are really about? Isn't the history of the Bible a history of redemption of how God has brought redemption into human history? So that it's not really so much, when you reflect on it, what Abraham or Isaac or anybody else does, it's what God is doing that is most important in Bible history. Now it's true that he often works through people but you don't want to lose sight of the fact that it's God who's working. Biblical history is redemptive history. So for that reason over against what has been termed exemplaristic preaching, some have advocated what has been termed redemptive historical preaching.

Redemptive Historical Preaching

Redemptive historical preaching is preaching in which the primary emphasis falls on the place that the events recorded in the Bible have in the history of God's revelation and redemption. Now, as I mentioned, in that history that we have in the Bible, which is a history of redemption, we encounter what certain people do or don't do. But there's more than just what men do because we are also confronted with the work of God in

history and his working his purposes out through the lives of various individuals. So biblical history is a history in which the acts of God become visible in the history of men. Bible history is the history that points forward to the mighty acts of God and the coming of his son Jesus Christ.

I think it's that history that we should see when we read the biblical text and these historical narratives and when we preach on them. So that when we read these narratives, and when we preach on them, we should learn something about who God is what he has promised, and what he has done in history.

The importance of what I've said lies in the fact that in this history you find the basis for our faith. And you find in this history the basis for the faith of all of God's people in all ages. The Christian faith is a historical faith. It's rooted in what God has done in history. So that history is really more important as a basis for faith than it is as a guide for conduct. That doesn't mean you can't learn things out of this history as far as the way which we should live. But you have to remember what the fundamental purpose of biblical history is.

Now to get back to Genesis 24, the redemptive historical perspective in Genesis 24 would say that when we look at that story, we should first of all see what God has done and is doing. And we should see God is fulfilling his promise to Abraham and Isaac that they would be the ancestors of a great people through whom ultimately all the peoples of the earth will be blessed. Remember, that's that promise God had given to Abraham--all the nations of the earth would be blessed, and his seed was to be counted through Isaac. Isaac was his seed of promise, not Ishmael. So we are to see God at work in this chapter, not Abraham, the servant, nor Rebekah. They're all involved, but we're to see God at work in bringing about this marriage. He uses that faith, the obedience, the prayer life of those in the narrative to accomplish his purpose. But God is the focus of the chapter. When we read that chapter we should see that God keeps his covenant. He is faithful to his promise, and as we observe that, we can be stirred up to serve him in faith and obedience as well.

So that redemptive historical approach would say we don't just perceive examples in historical narratives of how we should live or what we should do or shouldn't do, but we received a revelation of God himself of who he is and how he works. The God who is at work in the time of Abraham and Isaac is that same God that is involved in our lives today. He is faithful today as he was then. So that sort of a perspective then is the perspective that a redemptive historical approach brings to the text.

Exemplaristic and Redemptive Historical: a Multi-Dimensional Approach

I don't think it's necessary to see any essential conflicts or contradictions between those two approaches. Some people have set it up in a way that they find a conflict or contradiction. You either preach one way or you preach the other way. You either use an exemplaristic or a redemptive historical method, and you can't combine them. It seems to me there is no essential conflict or contradiction between the two methods. I think we clearly do receive examples in the Bible, but the point is we shouldn't separate or isolate the examples we draw from a given historical narrative. We shouldn't isolate that from the redemptive historical context in which it is given to us. If you use an exclusively exemplaristic approach, it tends to remove the narratives from the place and function of the events narrated and the movement of redemptive history. Biblical historical narratives should be seen in their relationship to each other and in their unity within the history of redemption. Of course, that finds its focal point in Christ.

Now, that doesn't mean that anyone or everyone who preaches in an exemplaristic way that they do not regard Christ as the central point to Bible history. The point is that that method of preaching may not make that apparent. The person who works from a redemptive historical perspective need not deny that you can find examples and illustrations in biblical history. The person who works from a redemptive historical perspective is concerned with the questions: Why? How? And in what sense they may be an example? I think you can only answer those questions of why, how, and in what sense if you put that given narrative in its redemptive historical context.

Related to that is this: I think we should always remember that the historical sections of the Bible are not just stories. What I mean by that is, historical narratives tell us about things that actually happened historically. You can tell a story, and it may or may not have happened. The historical narratives of the Bible tell us about things that happened. That means that they should be handled as real history and not as parables simply given to illustrate some truth. Nothing is wrong with a parable. Jesus used parables to illustrate truths. But the historical narratives of the Old Testament are not parables. Historical narratives of the Old Testament tell us about things that happened.

Doctrinal and Historical Sections of Scripture

That brings up the question of the relationship of the doctrinal sections of scripture to the historical sections of scripture. The general principle there is this: history is foundational to doctrine. You get the doctrine of justification of the atonement that rests on the historical event of the work of Christ and his death on the cross and his burial and his resurrection. That history is foundational to the doctrine. If you really understand that, you will not look on biblical history as merely illustrative. It may be illustrative, but it's much more than that because history does not just illustrate doctrine, it provides the basis for doctrine. If you take the historical sections of the Bible as merely illustrative, then it's really not important whether the events described actually happened or not.

Faith Rooted in History – S. R. Driver Counter Example

S. R. Driver's commentary on Genesis says this of the patriarchal narratives. I quote, "How much of these narratives is truly historical and how much due to popular fancy and embellishment, we cannot say. But the important and real significance of the narrative lies in the types of character which they exhibit and in the moral and spiritual lessons which, whether they are strictly historical or not, may be deduced from that. The patriarchs are examples of faith and goodness and also sometimes of unworthiness and moral failure." There's S. R. Driver who really feels that the patriarchal narratives are of

little historical value. He doesn't think the events described there really happened. But he says they're of value to us in the types of character; they're examples of moral failure. You see, to Driver, whether or not those stories tell of something that actually happened in redemptive history is of no importance to him. He's concerned only with religious and moral lessons. That's an illustrative, or exemplaristic use.

But what he's lost is the perspective of the role and function of those events in redemptive history. For Driver faith really isn't rooted in history but genuine biblical faith is rooted in history. I think our preaching should demonstrate that really like the preaching of Peter and Paul. If you go to the book of Acts and look at those sermons in the book of Acts, what do they do? They recite, or retell, the history of the Old Testament period. What God was doing in calling Abraham and raising up David and bringing to fulfillment the promise of the coming of the Messiah. That's redemptive historical preaching. We need to see how God was at work in a revelatory and redemptive way in the events of the Bible.

So again I think that preaching on historical narratives in the Old Testament needs to have that redemptive historical perspective. I wouldn't say that to deny or exclude the possibility of finding illustrative or exemplary significance as well, but I think the redemptive historical context will tell you in what way something can be illustrative or exemplaristic. And if you only see some illustrative or exemplaristic significance, you've lost a very important dimension of the reason for this narrative's being included in Scripture in the first place. You can illustrate a doctrinal text with an example from a narrative text, but if you choose a narrative text for a sermon, I think you must take it in its integrity and its specific place in the history of redemption. That's not to be taken just as illustrative, but as some way contributing to this progress and movement of redemptive history. It seems to me that that perspective needs to be included in preaching on narrative texts.

That's not easily done. With some historical narratives it's more easily done than with others, and with the some you wonder how. How is this particular narrative

functioning in this ongoing process of redemptive history? I think that's something that needs a lot of work and a lot of thought, but I think that it's something worth working at and thinking about.

Illustrating a Doctrine Using a Historical Text

As I mentioned, what I want to do from this point is get back into these Elijah narratives and give some illustrations of how a redemptive historical perspective may throw light on significance or meaning in some of these Elijah narratives. Unfortunately, our time is going too quickly. You can illustrate a doctrinal text with a specific event in redemptive history or with a narrative text, but if you choose a narrative text, you must take it in its integrity and its specific place in the history of redemption--that is, not just as illustrative. You can illustrate a doctrinal text with a narrative text. You can also illustrate a doctrinal text with an example from church history. You can illustrate from most anywhere. I don't think there's any more inherent value in using the biblical text as an illustration than there is from using an illustration from some other source. You can create all kinds of distortions if you don't keep that context. I think the same principles apply there as well. For any narrative text, it seems to me, you have the same principles at work. You can distinguish a narrative text from other kinds of texts; you have prophetic texts, poetic texts, you have proverbs, you have didactic texts, and doctrinal texts. When you get to narrative, it seems to me the reason why there's so much narrative in the Bible is because biblical faith is rooted in what happened in history. And so these narrative texts are telling us what happened in history, which is really the basis of our faith.

As far as Driver's concerned, these things never happened. They're parables, fairy tales, whatever. So his faith cannot be rooted in things that happened in history. What his faith is, I'd let him define that; I don't know. My guess is it's more an existential kind of identification at some point with the kinds of faith that are illustrated in these "fables." But it's not a faith that's rooted in events that happened in history because he says these didn't happen.

I would say when you come to hearing preaching on narrative texts, particularly Old Testament narrative texts, probably 95 percent of the time it's going to be an illustrative/exemplaristic thing, and this larger perspective of movement of redemptive history is hardly even touched on.

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