

Old Testament History and Theology

Acts 7:1-8

There are two basic ways to study the Bible, and I am not referring to a matter of right and wrong. There are two good and proper ways to study the Bible, with the goal and purpose of understanding the whole teaching of the whole Bible. I will usually use the word theology in this context, which is to say, when I use those words, I mean that studying theology is the same thing as studying the Bible. Theology is then nothing other than a label for the content of the Bible. And, again, I propose two ways to study that biblical content. Two ways that complement each other. Two ways that fit together perfectly and consistently.

The first way is this. You take the whole teaching of the whole Bible, and you put all of that content into categories. Subjects. Or doctrines. So you have the doctrine of God. With that, the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of Jesus, the son of God, the doctrine of his full deity and the doctrine of his full humanity. You have the doctrine of man, man as created by God before the fall. Then the doctrine of sin and the fall. And the curse. And then, of course, there is the doctrine of salvation. And I could go on. A rather full list of all those doctrines is found in the 33 chapters of our Westminster Confession of Faith. That confession of faith is a study of the Bible, organized by subject matter, one for each specific doctrine, and you learn each doctrine by referring to all sorts of Bible passages from everywhere in the Bible. We usually call that systematic theology. Studying the Bible according to a list of subjects that form a system of doctrine covering everything that the Bible teaches. It gives structure and stability to your understanding of the Bible. It gives order and consistency. So that, as Paul emphasizes in,

Eph. 4:14 "...that we should no longer be children, tossed to

and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting."

The great value of that method of Bible study is reflected by the emphasis we have upon the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. I readily admit that my mind is very much attuned to this sort of systematic study, which is why I liked the study of math and science and did very well with that when I was in school. My mind works well identifying and defining categories, and that is a good thing!

There is a second way to study the Bible, however; again, not in conflict with what I just described, but a complement to it. A necessary complement, especially for the understanding of the Old Testament. This method of Bible study is often called biblical theology, which I think is an unfortunate label because it implies that systematic theology is un-biblical. But that's the title often used, and in my seminary courses, there were classes in systematic theology and other classes in biblical theology, there were two separate departments among the faculty reflecting those two things. And so biblical theology is this, a study of the Bible as it unfolds in the course of history, especially with regard to the study of the Old Testament.

Let me put it this way. You can't study the Old Testament merely as history. You cannot deny the historical accuracy of the events, as if you are studying legends and myths, but there is more to it than plain history. There is more to the history of the Old Testament nation of Israel than merely the history of a certain, particular nation which existed from the Exodus out of Egypt about 1400 BC until the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century AD. It is not simply history, or bare history, but more fully, it is the history of redemption. It is the history of God's covenant people. It is the history of God's work of salvation, which would

be fully and finally accomplished with the incarnation of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ. So all the events of Old Testament history embody the acts of God in salvation. All the events of Old Testament history come to pass in historical sequence in order to demonstrate and define the eternal plan and purpose of God to save his people from their sins.

So, again, it is not just history, but the history of redemption, and so the phrase “redemptive historical” is often used to describe the method by which we explain and understand the Old Testament and interpret Old Testament history. We do not use a merely historical method to interpret the Old Testament, but rather a redemptive historical method. Or more simply, we use the phrase biblical theology. Or we use the heading that was given to the very first class I had in seminary, Old Testament History and Theology. It is fair to say that that course influenced my mind and increased my understanding of the Bible more than any other single course I took during those three years.

Having tried to explain all of that to you this morning, let’s study the great example of that method of studying and understanding the Old Testament. It is the example that Stephen gives us, a great lesson in Old Testament History and Theology, a redemptive historical explanation of the gospel through the events of the Old Testament. Remember from two weeks ago, Stephen, one of the original seven deacons, is in danger from those who oppose him.

v.12 “And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.”

Yet, his opponents gave him the opportunity to defend himself.
v.1 “Then the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

Stephen’s response is simply marvelous. He gives an extended exposition of the history of God’s people Israel in the Old Testament. But it is not just a history lesson. Remember, Stephen’s life is in danger, and yet this is what he chose to say. He speaks about the history of God’s people in the Old Testament, but actually, it is the gospel which he proclaimed to those who would eventually put him to death for what they believed to be blasphemy. These first 53 verses in Acts 7 are Stephen’s presentation of the gospel, a gospel not presented here in terms of categories or doctrines, like justification or regeneration. These verses do not identify the particular headings of systematic theology, such as you might find with much of the Apostle Paul’s writing, but here, with Stephen, we find a redemptive historical approach to the gospel. It is the same gospel as what Paul will preach, but with Stephen that gospel is expressed in the context of unfolding and outworking of history. That is what he chose to say as he defended himself under the threat of death, which was actually carried out, as we studied last week. He begins with,

I. THE CALL OF ABRAHAM.

Few of us, I suspect, if we were being called to defend ourselves and our faith against enemies who were bent on killing us, would begin with the historical account of God’s call to Abraham. But Stephen does.

v.2 “And he said, “Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, 3 and said to him, Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.””

Going back to,

Gen. 12:1 “Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you.”

Then we read,

Gen. 12:4 “So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5 Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan.”

It is fair to say that the rest of the Old Testament is nothing but the outworking of that promise. It is a covenant promise, that is a promise of God expressed in the form of a covenant, a contract, a bond in blood, between God and his people. God gives to Abraham,

A. The covenant promise of land.

Note how God is identified here in verse 2, as “the God of glory.” The God of weight, of substance, the God who is greater than all his creatures, the God who himself made heaven and earth, you and me. The God of power, absolute power. Infinite power and sovereign authority. So we read,

Ps. 29:1 “Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness. 3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters. 4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.”

And that God of glory promised Abraham land, and the

fulfillment of that promise will occupy the rest of Old Testament history. Let me skip to the end of that story, the meaning of the fulfillment of that promise. And I don’t have to guess what that is.

Heb. 11:8 “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

There it is. One simple sentence, expressing the meaning for one of the greatest promises and most predominant themes throughout the whole Old Testament. There are probably hundreds of references to this promise. The promise of land, the inheritance of the land. And what does that land represent? What is the redemptive, historical meaning of that land? Abraham knew. He understood. “For he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”

The promise of God wasn’t about a little country in the area we now call the Middle East. And that promise certainly isn’t focused upon that nation we now call Israel, a nation created by the United Nations in 1948 as a place for ethnic Jews to live in peace and security in the midst of all their Arab neighbors. God didn’t promise unbelieving Jews of our day a country of their own in the middle east. Rather, God promised to his people, his covenant people, a “city which has foundations”, in other words a city that will always abide and never be destroyed. He promised a city which he himself, the God of glory, would build.

I could spent the next year preaching from different Old Testament passages that point to the fulfillment of that great promise, but let me skip to the final explanation we find in,

Rev. 21:1 “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. 4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” 5 Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”

That great description of this promised city continues in, Rev. 21:10 “And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. 12 Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: 13 three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west.”

Resisting the temptation to read the whole chapter, I will skip to,

Rev. 21:22 “But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. 24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. 25 Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). 26 And they shall bring

the glory and the honor of the nations into it. 27 But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.”

We call that heaven. Or more accurately and more fully, the new heavens and the new earth. The new Jerusalem, or Jerusalem above., as Paul refers to it in Galatians 4:26. And that is what God promises to Abraham, to which Stephen refers in Acts 7, “the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Stephen also then refers to what I would call,

B. The obedience of faith.

Again, remember, this isn’t just a history lesson. Stephen isn’t trying to save his life by proving to his enemies that he understands the history of the nation of Israel. Nor is his life threatened because he gave some sort of historical lecture. Rather, his reference to God’s covenant promise to Abraham includes the duty and obligation of God’s people to believe the promise, to respond to God’s promise in faith. And if I can put it this way, obedience of faith.

I don’t mean by such obedience that somehow God’s people earn favor with God or gain the benefit or blessing of salvation by their obedience, but rather that the obedience of faith refers to the willing submission to receive the gift of life which God offers, and to follow him. For Abraham, explaining the obedience of faith is easy to do. God promised Abraham a great land. And thus he called Abraham to leave his home.

v.3 “Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.”

And Abraham did just that.

v.4 “Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.”

He believed God’s promise of land, and believing, he obeyed. So we read,

Heb. 11:8 “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.”

He believed God’s promise of land, even though, in this life, he never received the inheritance.

Heb. 11:9 “By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise.”

And so that great chapter continues,

Heb. 11:13 “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. 15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.”

That is the obedience of faith, the willingness to live by faith not by sight! The willingness to live in tents, in other words, without a permanent home. And that obedience of faith is precisely that to which we Christians today are called as well. We are strangers and pilgrims throughout our stay on this earth. We are not citizens of this world, but sojourners, temporary residents, aliens! For our home, the land promised to us, is that land of

which I just spoke from Revelation 21. Thus we are called this same obedience of faith. Peter puts it very directly,

1 Peter 2:11 “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, 12 having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.”

Our time on earth is temporary, a temporary stay, and we need to live accordingly.

1 Peter 1:17 “And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; 18 knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”

The ESV translates that very well, “the time of your stay here” is translated, “throughout the time of your exile.” That’s an accurate description of our lives in this present age, “throughout the time of your exile.” We are living in exile. This world is not our home. With Abraham, we are looking for that great city with foundations, the eternal city. And so as we live as exiles and aliens, we live by faith, by the obedience of faith. As did Abraham, the great man of faith.

And related to that great covenant promise of land, Stephen also declares,

C. The promise of a great nation.

God promised Abraham land. But not just a place to live. A nation. A great nation.

Going back to the promise of Genesis 12 which Stephen quotes in verse 3, God is not merely providing a pilgrim people a place to call their own. Even more than that, he will make them great!

Gen. 12:1 “Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. 2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Let me stress something here about the meaning of this great nation. It is a nation that will bring a blessing to all the nations. Genesis 12:3, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” And that blessing is nothing less than the blessing of the gospel itself. You see, that promise, that very promise, is what the apostle Paul will call “the gospel.” Turn with me to Galatians 3, where Paul makes specific reference to Abraham. He speaks of justification by faith, the blessing of being received as righteous in God’s sight by faith, not by works.

Gal. 3:6 “...just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

Abraham, of course, is the preeminent Old Testament example of justification by faith, and he was justified, his sins forgiven and his life redeemed from the curse of death because he believed! He believed God’s promise. Thus,

Gal. 3:7 “Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.”

So we are the children of Abraham, we Christians! We who believe in Jesus, we are the descendants of Abraham that we will study next week. We are the recipients of this covenant promise

of the land, not the nation of Israel that exists today among the nations our present world. We are “the Israel of God,” a phrase Paul uses in Galatians 6:16. And as the Israel of God, the recipients of God’s covenant promise to Abraham, with this promise of a great nation that will bring blessing to the whole world, we know that that promise of the land is the promise of the gospel. Keep reading in,

Gal. 3:8 “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.”

That’s the gospel. That’s Stephen’s point! This new Christian church, in which he was just ordained as a deacon, this body of believers in Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. That promise is the promise of the gospel, the gospel preached “to Abraham beforehand.” It is the gospel Stephen is preaching to those who are about to kill him. It the gospel that calls upon the hearer to believe in Jesus, who is the blessing God promised to Abraham!

Let me go back to Genesis,

Gen. 17:1 “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. 2 And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” 3 Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: 4 “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting

covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. 8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

That’s the gospel. God promises, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” And now, in the New Testament, that promise is proclaimed to all the nations of the world. That is the blessing we have in Abraham.

There is a second part of that covenant promise, in addition to the land. There is also the promise of descendants for Abraham. I had originally planned to include that today, and study verses 1 through 8, but I realized this week I wouldn’t have time to do so. So if you notice my outline today, I have only covered the first point, and so I will finish this sermon next week.

Let me end today with a final reminder of that gospel the was preached beforehand to Abraham, the gospel I continue to preach today. I’ll go back to Galatians 3, where Paul defines the chief blessing and benefit of the gospel for us, what he calls “the blessing of Abraham.” That blessing, the gospel, is now for all the nations, and it is the gospel you must believe if you wish to inherit that glorious land which God has promised. The blessing of the gospel is this, that we are redeemed, rescued from the curse of death which our sin has earned for us. We are freed from the curse of the law, the penalty of death which God imposed upon sin. And we are freed from that curse, through faith in Jesus.

Gal. 3:13 “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), 14 that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.”