

Let the Bible Speak for Itself



# **Let the Bible Speak for Itself**

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**BRIDGEWAY**

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To  
Derek and Ruth Warren



## CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	9
1. Getting the right approach	11
2. Reading with understanding (i)	18
3. Reading with understanding (ii)	28
4. Helping others	38
5. Preparing the sermon	46
6. Reaching the audience	58
7. Controlling the content	68
8. Expounding the Old Testament (i)	74
9. Expounding the Old Testament (ii)	85
10. Expounding the New Testament (i)	96
11. Expounding the New Testament (ii)	103
12. Planning the teaching program	111
13. Teaching non-Christians	122
14. Improving as we go	135
<i>Books by the same author</i>	140



## Preface

Most Christians have a desire to know and follow the Bible better, but many become discouraged when they find themselves reading without the freshness and interest they would like. Most preachers would like to enthuse their audiences more, but many find that they themselves have a similar lack of freshness and interest. The spirit is willing, but the spark is not there.

Perhaps we sometimes try too hard – or if not too hard, perhaps in the wrong way. We want the Bible to speak to us, but it seems at times to respond rather reluctantly. Part of our problem seems to be that we have our own ideas of what the Bible should do, and then we try to make it fit those ideas. My suggestion is that we relax a little, and let the Bible do whatever it wants to do. Let the Bible speak for itself. Our job is not to make the Bible do or say anything, but to understand it and submit to it. Maybe we need to reconsider how we read and teach the Bible. This book is concerned with both issues, but in particular with how we teach.

This is not, however, a book on the techniques of preaching. My special concern is to consider how we can understand and teach the Bible in the form God gave it; that is, as a collection of books widely different in style and content. My aim is to help people to study the Bible ‘a book at a time’, and especially to preach the Bible ‘a book at a time’.

But when as preachers we attempt this, we often finish at one of two extremes. One is to carry out a verse-by-verse or word-by-word study that goes on for months, leaving the audience bored and resistant to any further expository teaching. The other is to fly over the top with a survey that leaves the audience no further enlightened concerning the meaning of the text of the book. There is, however, a middle course, and that is what this book is about.

My aim is to consider how we who are preachers and teachers can expound an entire biblical book in a reasonable number of studies, while bearing in mind the pastoral needs of

the audience. We want to explain the text without tiring people with technical discussion, and we want to minister to people's needs while remaining true to the text's meaning.

The contents of this book are the substance of teaching sessions I have conducted in more than a dozen countries. These sessions have mostly resulted from the use of my *Bridge Bible Commentary*, where I have given in written form the kind of textual explanation that can provide a base on which preachers might build their own sermons.

But in neither this book nor the *Commentary* will readers find the work done for them. We must all do our own study and think out our own applications, whether for ourselves or the audience, and that exercise must centre on a proper understanding of the biblical text. The Bible has its own way of making itself relevant to us, but it can usually do this only when we understand it. My prayer is that this book will help readers to know the Bible better for themselves, and then to preach and teach in a way that will instruct and enthuse others.

Don Fleming

## Getting the right approach

### **A unique book, but not difficult**

When we read the Bible, we soon become aware that what we are reading is no ordinary book. If we are Christians, we read it as the written Word of God, a book that gives us a knowledge of who God is and what he has done for the people he created. The Bible shows us how people can live in a right relationship with God and with each other.

God is an eternal being, and therefore we cannot properly measure his character or activity by anything we can see in the material world. Human language is not adequate to describe a person who has no physical form or who carries out his work without any limits to his knowledge. That does not mean, however, that the Bible is beyond our understanding. God may be great beyond the limits of a world of time and space, but people who live within that world can still know him. Young children may not understand the business and social matters that concern their parents, but they can still enjoy a relationship with them. And the parents can still communicate with their children. Likewise, as we enjoy a relationship with God he speaks to us, and he does so in a way that we can understand.

Because it is God's Word to us, the Bible is an extraordinary book, but it is not a difficult book. When God speaks, he speaks in a way that ordinary people can understand. One reason why people do not enjoy the Bible is that they fail to see this. They assume that if a book is the Word of God, it must be so deep in meaning that ordinary people cannot possibly understand it. Some even feel they are being irreverent if they see and enjoy the down-to-earth pictures that the Bible presents.

When reading the Bible, we must see the difference between the great truths that the Bible reveals, and the understandable way in which it presents those truths. Our human minds may not

be capable of comprehending the full meaning behind a revealed truth (for example, that in Jesus the eternal and uncreated Son of God was born into the world as one of his own creatures), but that does not stop us from understanding the revealed truth itself (in this case, the story of Jesus' birth). Likewise there is a sense in which we can never comprehend how a holy and just God can accept sinners into his presence as righteous, but the Bible's explanation of this (namely, that Jesus' death enables God to do it) is straightforward and understandable.

The problem with many Christians when they read the Bible is that they *expect* it to be difficult. They may even feel that if they understand it too easily they are unspiritual and do not appreciate it as God's Word. This applies to preachers also. Too often the Bible is difficult only because preachers make it difficult, perhaps because of a desire to impress the audience with their spirituality or learning. Rather, their desire should be to help the audience so that people go home from church knowing the Bible better than when they arrived.

### **Anyone can understand**

A unique feature of the Bible is that though learned scholars can never know all that can be known about it, the simplest reader can still grasp its message. We must remember that when the books of the Bible were written, many of the original readers were not highly educated by today's standards. Many of the recipients of the New Testament letters were new Christians who had no previous association with the church. Yet these people apparently understood what the writers were saying.

One reason for the inadequate understanding of the Bible among Christians today is that many read it in the wrong way and many preach it in the wrong way. If we want to understand the Bible better, we may need to change some long-established habits, both as readers and as preachers.

### **The work of the Holy Spirit**

Christians believe that the writers of the books of the Bible wrote through the activity of God's Spirit upon them (2 Peter

1:21). But the writers were not robots. They were not like human typewriters whom God used to send out his messages regardless of how they thought or felt. They were intelligent people who wrote because they had something they wanted to talk about. At the same time their writings were inspired by God and therefore have God's mark of approval upon them. They are an authoritative standard for teaching truth, correcting error and instructing in right living (2 Tim 3:16-17).

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, he pointed out that because Christians have the Spirit of God within them, they have the ability to know God and his purposes (1 Cor 2:10-13). This does not mean that Christians have no need to read the Bible. On the contrary, God has given us the Bible so that the indwelling Spirit has something objective, historical and factual to use in teaching us. God has given the Holy Spirit to us not to make Bible study unnecessary, but to make it meaningful.

This same indwelling Holy Spirit is the one who inspired the writing of the Scriptures in the first place. Therefore, if we can learn something about the circumstances in which the Spirit inspired the original writings, we shall be in a good position to see the Spirit's application to us today. The Scriptures have a power within them. They are living and active (Heb 4:12), and will make their meaning relevant to us once we understand them.

### A duty for all

Our first duty, then, is to *understand* the Scriptures, not to go looking for lessons in them. Sometimes Christians think they must get a special lesson or 'thought' for themselves from every portion they read, otherwise they have failed. They then feel unspiritual. To avoid this feeling they force the Bible to give them some special 'thought' – almost any thought will do, so long as it makes them feel satisfied that they have not wasted their Bible-reading time.

This is not a healthy attitude to have towards Bible reading. In fact, it can be a disrespectful attitude. Our job is not to force the Bible to do things for us, but to submit to it. We are not

masters of the Bible; it is master of us. We have to understand what the Bible is saying, not make it do tricks for us. On the one hand we have to relax and not worry too much if we do not get a thought from every verse. On the other hand we have to spend more time and effort trying to understand the meaning of the portion of the Bible we are reading. Once we have understood that meaning, we shall usually see the application so clearly that we shall wonder why we did not see it before. Having asked ourselves what the portion of Scripture means, we then ask ourselves what we can learn from it.

God wants his people to carry out their spiritual exercises not just with the spirit, but with the mind also (1 Cor 14:15). He wants us to understand his Word, and if we ask his help in our reading and study we can be assured he will give it. God gives to those who ask in faith (James 1:5).

In addition, God has given to his church various kinds of teachers, among whom are those specially equipped by his Spirit to explain his Word more clearly (1 Cor 12:8; Eph 4:11-14). These teachers, like those in New Testament times, may teach by their spoken words or by their writings, and we should make the effort to hear what they say and read what they write.

If teachers are to explain the Scriptures for others, they should have a correct approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures. But they are not the only ones who should be concerned about correct interpretation. The matter is relevant to all Christians, because all Christians have a duty to test what they hear and read (1 Cor 14:29; 1 Thess 5:21; 1 John 4:1). We must all therefore have some degree of confidence in understanding what the Bible says and knowing what it means.

### **Honesty and patience**

Every reader of the Scriptures has at times experienced the difficulty of discovering the exact meaning of a Bible book (or portion of a book). This is partly because we today are far removed from the events, and probably from the culture and language, of the biblical era. Nevertheless, helpful material concerning the world of the Bible is available to us, and with

such helps we should study the Bible with confidence and enthusiasm.

Naturally, we want our Bible reading to give us help for daily living, but our desire for practical applications should not influence our interpretation of what the biblical author wrote. Even the challenge or comfort of devotional thoughts does not make those thoughts a correct interpretation of the Scriptures. If we read the Bible looking only for devotional thoughts, we shall soon find ourselves neglecting whole areas of the Bible in order to concentrate on those parts that provide more obvious lessons. We may find that we repeatedly read Psalms, Philippians and James, but neglect Kings, Jeremiah and Hebrews. In the process we limit our spiritual growth.

The Bible is not a collection of devotional thoughts, moral rules or abstract religious ideas. It is a collection of all sorts of writings, which differ from each other in form, style, purpose and content. We must not force the Bible to give us spiritual lessons or answers to questions, but allow each writer to say what he wants to say, regardless of what we might like him to say. We do not honour the Bible when we make it mean something different from what the writer meant. Honesty is essential if we are to profit from our Bible study.

Another essential to our reading of the Bible is patience. We must realize that one characteristic of language, whether written or spoken, is that a person can only say one thing at a time. A single statement in one part of the Bible may be concerned with only one aspect of a subject – the aspect of interest to the writer at the time. If it differs from another statement elsewhere in the Bible, that is no cause for alarm. Nor is it cause to twist one portion of Scripture to make it fit with another.

The biblical subject of faith provides a simple example. The prophet Habakkuk searched unsuccessfully for reasons why God allowed certain things to happen, but in the process he learnt to exercise faith in the wisdom, power and love of God (Hab 3:16-19). The book of Habakkuk does not talk about other aspects of faith, for that is not its purpose. It does not mention issues such

as moving mountains (Matt 21:21-22), healing the sick (James 5:14-15), or exercising gifts in Christian ministry (1 Cor 12:7-9). When Paul writes to the Romans about faith, he emphasizes that it is the only way by which sinners can receive salvation (Rom 1:16-17; 3:21-22). The writer to the Hebrews has a different emphasis, for he wants to show that faith involves perseverance and hope. Those with faith look to something beyond what they see, and they persevere in expectancy of it (Heb 11:1,8,39). James mentions faith in yet another context when he says that if people have genuine faith, they will demonstrate it in their actions (James 2:18-20).

All these writers speak of faith, but each with a different issue in mind. We must not expect all the writers say the same thing, nor must we be disappointed if a particular writer does not say all that we would like him to say. A writer, like any other person, can say only one thing at a time. We need a reverent patience when reading the Bible, allowing it to say whatever it wants to say, in its own way and in its own time.

### **The text is supreme**

When we speak of the text of Scripture, we do not mean an isolated verse from the Bible, but the body of material before us as we read, whether the whole Bible, a whole book or part of a book. Because we respect the Bible's authority, we usually like to quote a chapter and verse to support our beliefs. The desire to have biblical authority is commendable, but we must be careful that it does not cause us to distort the meaning of the text.

Sometimes we study what is called systematic theology. This is a kind of study that links verses from all over the Bible to give us teaching on biblical subjects. We should be careful, however, not to engage extensively in this kind of study till we have first understood the verses in their original setting. In general, we should carry out a proper study of a Bible book before we quote isolated verses from it.

The text of Scripture in the form God gave it is supreme. It is this text that is the Word of God, not our reorganization of it. We must be careful not to force the text to fit any scheme of

theological interpretation, no matter how useful we may consider that scheme to be. Like life in general, the Bible is full of loose ends – things that do not tie up, apparent inconsistencies, unanswered questions. If the plain meaning of a portion of Scripture does not tie in with our neatly ordered scheme of theological interpretation, we should re-examine our scheme rather than twist the Scriptures.

No matter which book of the Bible we read, we are likely to meet statements that at first puzzle us. Some people feel they cannot go on till they have solved these problems. If, however, a problem is not important to the overall meaning of the section, we should probably do better to pass over it for the time being. As we progress further in our study of the book, or even move on to other books, we may find that the problem solves itself. Then again, it may not. But one day we shall come back to the book, and with the greater insight gained since the previous reading, we may find an answer to the earlier difficulty.

Our Christian lives are in a state of constant change. At no stage do we have perfect knowledge, and therefore we must be patient when we meet problems. We might want immediate answers, but we do not always get them.

We come to the Bible as learners. We cannot expect to know all there is to know the first time we start to study the Bible seriously. Nor should we try immediately to prove all our beliefs by looking for appropriate verses. Our first responsibility is to accept the Word in the form God gave it. Our duty is not to use the text, but to allow the text to use us. We must understand the text, and as we allow it to transform our minds we shall know God's will for us (Rom 12:2).

## Reading with understanding (i)

### **Before we start**

We need to be careful when we talk about procedures and methods in relation to biblical interpretation, because the Bible is not one continuous writing, consistent throughout in style and content. It is a collection of books that vary greatly in form. We must therefore read different books in different ways. There are, however, certain matters that remain basic to any study of the Bible, no matter which book of the Bible we read.

Everybody knows that the world of the biblical era was different from the world of today, yet many Christians overlook this when reading the Bible. If we want to understand the Bible better, we must gain some knowledge of the geographical, social and religious features of the biblical world. We can receive help in this from any handbook, dictionary, encyclopaedia, atlas, directory, magazine or film that gives information about the regions and eras covered by the Bible story. If we are keen to learn, we may find there are more opportunities to increase our general knowledge than we thought.

### **Know the country**

If we today speak to local friends about a journey we made to another part of our country, the friends usually have some understanding of the places we mention – whether they are north or south, hot or cold, dry or rainy, flat or mountainous – and their knowledge gives them interest in our story. But if we talk about a journey to a far-off country and mention places our friends know nothing about, our story does not have the same interest. Because the names of places mean nothing to them, the friends cannot appreciate significant parts of our story.

This latter case, unfortunately, is an example of the way many of us read the Bible. We often take no notice of the names of places (perhaps because the names are hard to pronounce or

perhaps because we cannot be bothered finding out where the places are), and as a result we fail to see the significance of important details that the writer records.

In Judges Chapters 17 and 18 there is a long story that has little meaning unless we know the locations of the places mentioned. The purpose of the story is to show how the people of the tribe of Dan were forced out of their tribal land on the Mediterranean coast and established a new settlement in Israel's far north. In the New Testament the account of Paul's missionary travels will lose a lot of its meaning if we do not follow Paul's routes on an atlas. When we see where Paul went, we have a clearer view of the strategy behind his activities.

Besides knowing about the locations of countries and towns, we must know something about the kind of land. Today, when someone mentions Siberia we think of a freezing wasteland, and when someone mentions the Sahara, we think of a hot desert. If we hear the Suez Canal mentioned, we think of a short cut from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean. We should develop the same familiarity with lands of the Bible.

Edom, for example, was a land of barren, rocky mountains, a fact that helps us understand biblical comments about it (Deut 2:1-3; Jer 49:16-17; Ezek 35:7-8). Although its land was largely unsuited to farming, it had access to international trading routes through its Red Sea port of Ezion-geber (or Elath). This explains why many Edomites became traders rather than farmers, and why Ezion-geber became a source of conflict between Edom and neighbours who wanted to control it (Deut 2:8; 1 Kings 9:26-28; 22:48; 2 Kings 14:22; 16:6; Amos 1:6,9).

The Bible writers did not need to describe the land of Edom, because their readers already knew about it (just as we know about the Sahara Desert or the Suez Canal). But when we read about Edom, we are far removed from it by time and distance. We therefore must make an effort to find out about it; otherwise we shall miss the significance of the writer's comments.

More important than the country of Edom is the city of Jerusalem. If we do not know that Jerusalem was a city on a

well-fortified hill, the account of David's conquest of Jerusalem in 2 Samuel Chapter 5 will make little sense. The same applies to certain references to Jerusalem in David's psalms.

Similarly, we must know about features of the Jordan River if we are to understand its significance in certain biblical events. The river was bordered by forest, had steep banks and flowed through a deep valley, all of which made crossing difficult. It could be conveniently crossed at only a few places (Josh 2:7; Judg 3:28; 7:24; 12:5). Since it divided Israel's territory into east and west, we must know which side of the river provides the writer's standpoint if we are to know which is the 'other' side (Num 32:5; Josh 22:4; 2 Sam 19:15; John 10:40).

The benefits that come to us through knowing about Edom, Jerusalem and the Jordan River are obvious. But these places are mentioned only as examples. The sorts of benefits they provide are multiplied as we learn about other countries, mountains, cities, rivers and valleys that the Bible mentions. This is not to suggest that before we read the Bible we must memorize an atlas or encyclopaedia. The suggestion is rather that as we read, we stop to find out whatever we can about significant places we meet. If we do this, we shall soon build a fund of information that we can readily draw upon when reading elsewhere in the Bible. When we see the significance of a place or feature in one story, we are not likely to forget it when we meet the same place or feature in another story.

### **The way of life**

In reading the Bible, we shall surely benefit from any knowledge we can gain of life in the ancient world. This involves more than knowing about isolated cultural habits or religious rituals. It involves a change in our thinking – almost as if we put ourselves in the position of those ancient people to see the meaning things had for them.

Consider, for example, the farming life that was common to most people in Old Testament Israel. We today realize that we should know something about Israel's agricultural practices (ploughing, sowing, reaping, threshing and the like) in order to

understand certain stories in the Bible. What we sometimes do not realize is that we must also know something about Israel's annual agricultural cycle in order to understand the significance of Israel's annual religious festivals. We miss the meaning of many Israelite religious practices if we fail to see how they were tied in with the everyday life of the people.

There were, however, harmful practices that arose out of Israel's agricultural life. Among these was Baal worship. This problem features repeatedly in the Old Testament, but modern readers will have difficulty understanding references to it if they do not know how it operated. The Bible writer does not stop in the middle of a story and say, 'I must now explain to you how Baalism worked', because the people for whom he wrote knew very well how it worked. But when we come to read the same writings a few thousand years later, we have to pause to find out whatever we can about the ancient practices.

We shall usually find this information in a Bible dictionary or directory, which in turn draws much of its information from the Bible itself. This information may be scattered through the Bible, but we can save ourselves time by using a helpful reference book where someone has done the research for us. In the case of Baalism, the information we learn in relation to one book will be widely useful, because Baalism is a central concern in many of the Old Testament prophets.

The preaching preserved in the Bible, like preaching today, not only concerns local problems, but also uses illustrations based on local customs and practices. We have to take time to learn about such customs and practices if we are to understand the ancient preachers.

When we read the New Testament, for instance, we sometimes have difficulty with Paul's teaching about Christians' being *adopted* into God's family, because it seems to conflict with statements elsewhere that suggest they are *born* into God's family. But these are just different pictures of salvation – two of the many that we find in the Bible. Pictures illustrate different aspects of a subject, and when we understand the practice of

adoption in Bible times, we appreciate the particular aspect of truth that Paul's picture illustrates. Our knowledge of ancient practices helps our knowledge of Christian doctrine.

### **When, how and why**

In addition to knowing something of the geography, cultures and religions of the Bible, we must know something of the historical settings of the various books of the Bible. In most cases, we shall understand the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament letters only when we know when and where they were written, under what circumstances and for what purpose. A knowledge of the books of Kings is basic to an understanding of the prophets, just as a knowledge of the book of Acts is basic to an understanding of Paul's letters.

Some books clearly announce their subject or purpose at the outset. Micah tells us that his book is concerned with the sins of the cities Samaria and Jerusalem, and he specifies the era in which he writes (Micah 1:1,5). Paul opens his letter to the Christians of Galatia by making it clear that he intends to attack the wrong teaching of those who have turned them aside from the faith (Gal 1:6-9).

But not all writers make such forthright opening statements, and we may have to spend time working through the material to discover the central theme. Many people have done this before us, and if we have access to their findings we should not hesitate to consult them. We do not have to agree with everything they say, but at least they will draw our attention to important information within the book.

In many cases, all we need is a little help in locating the statements within a book that give us the clue to its writing. For example, when Paul begins a criticism of the Corinthians by saying 'I have heard from people of Chloe's household that there is quarrelling among you' (1 Cor 1:11), we learn something about the state of affairs in Corinth and consequently about the background to the letter. When he says, 'It is reported there is immorality among you' (1 Cor 5:1), we know more about what prompted him to write. When he adds, 'Now concerning the

matters about which you wrote' (1 Cor 7:1), we learn that he had received a letter from Corinth listing a number of questions, which he deals with one by one (e.g. 1 Cor 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). And so it goes on. The letter contains statements that help build up a background picture – why Paul wrote, where he was at the time, who was with him, what his plans were and so on.

It is essential to use this background information; otherwise we shall not understand the book as we ought. To illustrate this, let us suppose that I am temporarily in a distant city and I receive a letter from my wife. If I gave that letter to people to read, they would read the words on the page and possibly understand some of the letter's contents, but much of it would have little meaning. They would not know people, places or incidents my wife wrote about, and would not understand references to matters we had discussed before I left home. If, however, I explained the background to all these people, places, incidents and matters, the readers would understand the letter better. Yet nothing in the letter has changed. The words are no more and no less than they were previously. But a knowledge of the background helps people understand their meaning.

We who read the Bible today are like those people in the distant city who read a letter originally written to someone else. We might be able to read the words printed on the page, but we shall not fully grasp their meaning unless we find out something about the people and issues involved. We are like people who find a newspaper a hundred years after it was printed. Those who first received the newspaper did not need a background to explain the issues mentioned in it, but we do.

Paul did not say, 'This is the background to my letter to the Corinthians', because the Corinthians already knew. There is therefore no inspired background to introduce the inspired writing. But we are not the Corinthians, and we need such a background if we are to understand the letter Paul wrote to them.

### **Writers' choice**

Lack of background knowledge is one reason why many readers find certain books of the Bible difficult, dull or

irrelevant. But these books can spring to life when we see how and why the author wrote. This applies not just to letters, but also to less personal writings such as historical records. We should take into consideration not just the circumstances surrounding the writing, but also such matters as the author's choice and arrangement of material.

Consider, for instance, the book of Chronicles. To many people this book looks uninteresting, because it seems to consist only of lists of names along with a repetition of historical records taken from Samuel and Kings. But once we see the writer's purpose and the way he uses his material, the book takes on a different appearance. It becomes lively and instructive.

The captive Jews in Babylon were about to return to their homeland, and the writer of Chronicles wanted to impress upon them the importance of rebuilding their national life on a proper basis. They were not just migrants returning to the land of their ancestors, but were a continuation of the pre-captivity nation; and that brought with it obligations. He therefore recounts the history of the Israelite kingdom to impress upon his readers that the Davidic line of kings is the only legitimate dynasty, Jerusalem the only legitimate capital, the temple in Jerusalem the only legitimate sanctuary, and the Levitical priesthood the only legitimate religious order. He chooses and arranges his material to emphasize these points.

Because of these central concerns, the Chronicler writes a book that differs considerably from Samuel and Kings. He adds material that is relevant to his purpose and omits material that is not. He wants to show that the rebuilt nation must have a properly functioning religious life if it is to enjoy God's blessing. When we read the book according to the writer's purpose, we find that it has a lot to say that is useful for us today.

Chronicles is among the least read books in the Bible, but it is not an exceptional example. If we take one of the most read books, the John's Gospel, we find that the writer again exercises care in selecting and using his material, for he too writes with a definite purpose in mind. He states that plenty of material is

available to him, but he has used only some of it. He has selected a few miracles, around which he has written a book to convince people that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, so that they might believe in him and find eternal life (John 20:30-31).

Luke likewise has a particular purpose in the way he selects and arranges his material. He writes for one who was apparently a high-ranking government official, to give him a trustworthy account of the birth and growth of Christianity (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3). Once we see Luke's purpose, we are more likely to see why he includes certain stories and what meaning he intends us to see in them.

### **God's revelation**

The Bible may provide us with interesting stories and moral instruction, but we must not think that the writers are mere story tellers or moral teachers. They are, above all, messengers of God who make him known to their readers. They show us how God was working out his purposes, whether among humankind in general or in the lives of his people. There is a danger that if we treat stories of people such as Joseph, Samson, David and Elisha as primarily stories for children, we shall miss their real purpose in the revelation of what God was doing.

Just as the Bible writers are not primarily storytellers or moral teachers, neither are they primarily historians. Their common purpose is to reveal and record God's activity in salvation and judgment. That is why the two books of Kings are not what we might expect historical books to be. They may treat politically unimportant events in detail, but dismiss politically important kings in only a few words. They do not simply record events, but show how God was working in the affairs of Israel, Judah and other nations.

Likewise in the New Testament we do not have a day-by-day record of Jesus' public ministry or a year-by-year record of the spread of Christianity. The Bible is not a book of world history, but a revelation of God's activity in bringing his plan of salvation to fulfilment. It does not make us superhuman beings with supernatural knowledge, but leads us to a meaningful life

through knowing God and trusting in his wisdom, power and love.

### Different kinds of literature

Perhaps the characteristic of the Bible that readers most commonly overlook is the variety of its literary forms. Within the Bible there are prose narratives, poems, wisdom sayings, laws, visions, letters, debates and genealogies. Books differ greatly from each other, and even within one book various parts may be in different styles. Whatever we read, we must know the kind of literature it is and interpret it accordingly.

For some reason we often fail to make this judgment when reading the Bible, though we make it naturally when reading most other literature. We know that a straightforward story is different from a poem and we read it differently. When we read a newspaper we know the difference between news reports, advertisements, features and cartoons, and we automatically adjust our reading attitude as we move from one kind of writing to the next. In fact, the writers expect us to make this adjustment; if we do not, we shall misunderstand them.

The original readers of the Bible clearly saw that different kinds of writers brought God's message in different ways. In Old Testament times there were priests, prophets and wisdom teachers (Jer 18:18), and in New Testament times evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph 4:11). All had different functions and different ways of carrying out those functions.

For example, consider the difference between the law-code of Moses and the writings of the prophets. The prophets often condemned sacrificial rituals, but not because they opposed the law. What they opposed was the behaviour of those who carried out the rituals. The law literature set out the requirements of the covenant to which the people were bound, and the priests' duty was to teach it. But the prophets spoke from a different viewpoint. They saw, as it were, through the eyes of God into the lives of people, and brought specific messages from God. The prophet was a preacher, not a law-giver, and challenged sinners to turn to God or suffer the consequences.

A wisdom teacher, by contrast, did not expect his audience to treat him as either a law-giver or a prophet. (The biblical books of Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are writings of wisdom teachers.) The wisdom teacher did not, as the prophet, speak from God's viewpoint and introduce his remarks with the words, 'Thus says the Lord'. Rather he looked at the problems of life from the viewpoint of the ordinary person, though he wrote always as a person of faith.

The important point is that the prophet and the wisdom teacher *expected* people to treat their messages differently. We should not interpret a statement from a prophet and an apparently similar (or contradictory) statement from a wisdom writer by the same fixed rules. If we fail to see the different standpoints of the writers, we shall misunderstand what they say.

### **A special case**

Apocalyptic writings, such as we find in Ezekiel, Zechariah and Revelation, require a kind of interpretation peculiar to themselves. They feature visions involving fearsome beasts and mysterious numbers, and usually concern conflicts out of which God and his people triumph. Those who lived in the time of the apocalyptic writers were familiar with this sort of literature and knew how to interpret it. We today do not readily understand such writings, and if we interpret the symbolism literally we shall misunderstand the writer's meaning.

We are naturally curious to know what the apocalyptic visions mean, but we must realize that the writers do not always talk about matters that are of immediate concern to us. If they do not tell us what we want to know, we must leave it at that. We cannot twist their words to suit ourselves. Nevertheless, we shall probably find relevance in their writings when we see how God dealt with his people in those difficult times, and then draw lessons for ourselves about God's dealings with us today.

## Reading with understanding (ii)

### Ideas put into words

Although matters of history, geography, culture, authorship, structure and literary form are constantly in our minds as we read the Bible, our ultimate concern is with the words themselves. Whatever language we speak, words are the means by which we express our ideas; and if we are to express those ideas correctly, we must use the right words.

The actual words that the Bible uses are therefore important. They say what God wanted to say. The Bible writers recognize this, and may even base a statement on a specific word. Paul does this in Galatians 3:16, where he draws attention to a word used in Genesis 12:7 concerning God's promises to Abraham and his descendants. The Hebrew word used in Genesis for 'descendants' has also been translated 'offspring' and 'seed'. It is singular, not plural, a point Paul uses to show that the true fulfilment of the promises is found not in a whole nation but in one specific person, namely, Jesus Christ.

This, however, does not mean that our reading of the Bible must be a word-by-word study. Words function as parts of a sentence, and their importance lies in the truth they express. New Testament writers may therefore quote Old Testament Scriptures without a word-for-word exactness. They express the meaning without following the wording. Paul does this in Romans 11:8 when he joins parts of Isaiah 29:10 and Deuteronomy 29:4 in his own free quotation.

Whether we read the Bible in our own language or in one of the original languages (Hebrew in the Old Testament, Greek in the New), we must realize that the unit of meaning can vary in length, depending on the style of writing and the purpose of the writer. In some cases much may depend on one or two words; in others the unit of meaning may consist of several sentences. But

always we must keep two viewpoints before us: the meaning of the words depends on their context within the sentence, and the meaning of the sentence depends on the words within it.

### Prose and poetry

Hebrew poetry is a good example of how one central idea might be expressed in a lengthy form. The meaning is found not by concentrating on individual words, but by looking at a number of lines or sentences that together represent the writer's idea. Words and phrases are carefully multiplied and arranged to produce an overall effect.

One statement, for instance, may express the main thought, and a second may repeat it in a slightly different (or parallel) form: 'To get wisdom is better than gold; to get understanding is more desirable than silver' (Prov 16:16). In other cases a verse may be repeated as a refrain (e.g. Ps 42:5,11), just as we today repeat a refrain when singing certain hymns. Repetition and parallelism are but two of many distinctive features of Hebrew poetry, but they remind us that we must consider how words are used if we are to understand their meaning. We need to know the kind of writing we are reading.

Since poetry is the literary form for much of the Old Testament (chiefly, the book of Psalms and most of the wisdom and prophetic literature), we need to recognize it as poetry if we are to understand it. Let us suppose, for example, that I am a poet. Suppose I write a poem, by which I express my innermost thoughts and deepest feelings. I choose and arrange the words in a certain way, with the aim of achieving a particular effect. I do not follow the normal rules for writing prose, and I may include various word-pictures, images, expressions and figures of speech that would not be suitable in prose.

But suppose someone picked up my poem and read it without any regard for poetry – as if it were a few paragraphs from the front page of the daily newspaper. Not only would the person fail to understand what I was saying, but I should be very disappointed. If I write poetry, I expect people to read it as poetry. Likewise the poet of the Bible expects us to read his

writing as poetry. Yet Christians often read it as if it were prose. In so doing they may interpret literally what the writer meant figuratively, but worse still they will probably miss the writer's mood and purpose completely.

### Tracing words

A useful aid in helping us find words and follow their usage is a concordance. A complete concordance will list every word of the Bible in alphabetical order, along with every occurrence of that word. The more detailed concordances will also show the Hebrew or Greek word from which each English word has been translated. These concordances may also contain a lexicon, which is an alphabetical index of the Hebrew and Greek words. Instructions will usually tell the reader how to use the concordance and the lexicon for greatest profit.

Although a concordance can be helpful, it can do little more than show us *where* words are used. It cannot tell us *how* words are used. We still need to know the context of each biblical book where a particular word occurs; otherwise we might misunderstand it. A word is not something fixed or mechanical. It is not like a number, which has a fixed value regardless of context, but can vary in its meaning and significance.

### A variety of meanings

We should not be surprised when we find that a word or phrase has different meanings in various parts of the Bible. That is part of the nature of language. As always, we must remember that the chief factor in determining the meaning of a word or phrase is the way the writer uses it. Words are part of a sentence, a sentence is part of a paragraph, and a paragraph is part of a book. These all form the context in which the words occur, and if we do not know the context we shall have difficulty in determining the meaning.

For example, the statement 'He moved to the left' is a straightforward statement, but it can have more than one meaning. It could mean that the person moved aside so that somebody could walk by, or it could mean that he had a

change in his political views. Only the context will decide the meaning.

In the same manner, the Bible uses words and phrases that may appear straightforward, but only the context can decide their meaning. This is the case with words such as ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’. In some cases ‘flesh’ refers to the physical body (Phil 1:24), but in others to sinful human nature (Rom 8:12-13). ‘Spirit’ may refer to an unseen evil being (Mark 7:25), the human spirit (2 Cor 7:1) or the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:25). Differences in meaning may at times be obvious, at other times not so obvious. But we cannot assume that a particular word has the same meaning each time we meet it in the Bible, or even in the same book of the Bible. We must consider how the writer uses the word.

The word ‘sinner’ is an example of this variation in meaning. We might think that ‘sinner’ is such a clear and simple word that its meaning would always be the same. In a broad sense this is true, but its specific meaning varies with usage.

When the writer of Ecclesiastes uses ‘sinner’, he is referring not to human beings in general, but to those frustrated people who search for meaning to life through wisdom, pleasure and work. The ‘sinner’ is the opposite of the ‘person who pleases God’ (Eccles 2:26; 7:26). In the Gospels the word has a different significance. There, according to common usage of the time, ‘sinners’ are people of low reputation such as prostitutes and tax collectors (Luke 7:34,37). When we come to Paul, we find he speaks of ‘sinners’ in the universal and theological sense that we usually associate with the word (Rom 3:23; 5:8).

Words often change in meaning over the years. We today can probably think of English words whose meanings have changed within our lifetime, and this sort of thing happened also in biblical times. We must therefore understand biblical words according to their meanings at the time the writers used them, not according to their present-day meanings.

We today might think of a prophet primarily as a person who predicts events (e.g. a weather prophet), but people in Old Testament times thought of a prophet primarily as a messenger

or spokesperson. Aaron was called a prophet because he spoke on behalf of Moses (Exod 7:1). The prophets whose writings we have in the Bible were people who spoke on behalf of God. In doing so they may have predicted what would follow if people heeded or ignored God's word, but primarily they were God's messengers. They were divinely appointed preachers who announced God's will to his people (Jer 1:7,9; 2:1-2).

### **Picture language**

Another feature of biblical language is the use of idioms. As with any speech or writing, the Bible uses idioms repeatedly, and we must be careful not to interpret them literally. We do not interpret literally the English expression, 'How do you do?' Neither should we interpret literally the biblical expression, 'He lifted up his eyes and saw'. When Amos made the statement concerning various countries that 'for three sins and for four' God would not withhold judgment, he was not saying that each country was guilty of three or four particular sins. He was using an idiom that meant they had sinned so often (GNB: 'again and again') that there was now no way of escaping judgment.

This idiomatic use of numbers occurs also where writers exaggerate for emphasis. Micah speaks of 'ten thousand rivers of oil' (Micah 6:7) and Paul of 'ten thousand words in a tongue' (1 Cor 14:19). These examples also show that the Bible does not always intend us to read figures as mathematical calculations. They may be idiomatic expressions or simply estimations, such as our English expressions 'several hundred', 'dozens of' and 'by the score'. The Bible's repeated use of the number 'forty' suggests that it may speak in 'round figures' or approximates, just as we do. On some occasions the figure may be precise, on others only approximate.

When we say a thing is not literal, we are not saying it is not true. On one occasion when I was preaching on the book of Revelation, I mentioned that we should not interpret the book literally. A person in the audience challenged the statement, thinking I was denying the truth within the book. What I was saying was that God revealed his truth through a series of

visions, and those visions have to be interpreted. I do not believe, for example, that human beings on earth are to be ruled by an animal that has four legs, seven heads, ten horns and a long tail. The animal in the vision is symbolic, not literal. It represents a person or system empowered by Satan to dominate the human race. It is not a literal animal like a lion or a bear, but a symbol for someone or something far more fearsome and deadly.

In reading Bible study books and listening to preachers, we shall meet the word ‘literal’ in one form or another. Therefore, we should know what the word means. Confusion exists because even in everyday speech people misuse the word. I recently heard a TV reporter say, ‘The building was literally bursting with people’. The building was not bursting at all; it was firm and intact, as we could see from the pictures. If it was literally bursting, we would have seen an explosion of bricks and human bodies. What the reporter meant was that the building was *figuratively* (not literally) bursting with people.

Figurative language is common in the Bible, and we must interpret it accordingly. If we say we do not interpret it literally, we are not saying we do not believe it. We accept what the writer wrote, and we want to understand what he meant.

The Old Testament prophets looked for the time in Israel when ‘every man would sit under his vine and under his fig tree’ (Micah 4:4). If we interpret this literally, it means that every man throughout the country would have to grow a vine and a fig tree and then go out of his house and sit under them. But if we interpret it figuratively (for it is a poetic figure of speech), we see it as the fulfilment of the Israelites’ desire to live in peace and contentment on their own property, free from all interference, hardship and oppression. We have interpreted the statement as the writer intended us to.

### **Many books, yet one**

Throughout this study we have seen that our first step is to interpret each portion of the Bible in its context. Each biblical writer had a definite purpose in addressing his readers, and we must interpret his writing according to that purpose.

However, that does not mean that we can interpret any part of the Bible with a total disregard for the rest of it. The Bible is a complete unit, and we must read each book in the context of the Bible as a whole. We can better understand the whole when we consider its parts, and we can better understand its parts when we consider the whole. We must keep both viewpoints before us at all times.

The unity of the Bible is not to be found in a neatly ordered system where the same word always has the same meaning. It is to be found in the harmony and perfection of the total revelation. We must not cut up the Bible into small pieces, as if God was constantly changing his ways or revising his plans. There is a consistency from start to finish. The Bible records what God was doing through human history, from the initial rebellion in Eden to the completion of his plan of salvation through Jesus Christ. The way the Bible makes known this developing plan of salvation is commonly called progressive revelation. The study of what God was doing through this process is commonly called biblical theology.

### **Revelation stage by stage**

God has a plan that gives meaning to the life of the human race, but he did not reveal that plan all at once at the beginning of human history. He revealed it stage by stage as he prepared people for the fuller revelation that came through Jesus Christ.

When people turn from sin to God and ask for his merciful forgiveness, they receive it, no matter what race or era they belong to. But God's forgiveness is not irresponsible, and his salvation is not haphazard. He works according to his own perfect plan, and the Bible shows how that plan developed.

In brief, God's plan was to choose one man (Abraham), from whom he made a nation (Israel), through which he brought the Saviour of the world (Jesus). The early parts of the Bible tell us how God gave Israel a code of behaviour to live by (the law of Moses) and a land to live in (Canaan). The story goes on to show how God established a dynasty in Israel (the dynasty of David), through which he brought the Messiah (Jesus). Jesus became the

Saviour and his followers set about taking the message of his salvation to the world. That salvation will reach its fulfilment with Jesus' return at the end of the age.

Once we see God's overall purposes and his direction of history towards their fulfilment, we understand the Bible better. By knowing where the various books fit into God's progressive revelation, we know better how to interpret them. We can then read each book in relation to the era in which it was written, and not force it to say more than the author intended.

In this way we shall avoid two extremes. On the one hand is the error of treating the Bible as solely of historical interest, as if it were no more than a piece of literature in a museum. On the other is the error of creating an artificial spirituality through trying to give a Christian meaning to every detail. Nevertheless, it is true that the New Testament writers saw more in the Old Testament than the original writers were aware of (1 Peter 1:10-12). We must therefore consider in what way the New Testament fulfils the Old.

### **Brought to fulfilment**

We have seen that, in the unfolding of God's purposes, each stage of the revelation depended on the former and at the same time developed it. We understand the meaning of each stage of the revelation according to the understanding of those who first received it. That meaning does not change as further revelations are given, but it does take on greater significance. We understand the Old Testament in its own setting, but with our knowledge of the New Testament we see the Old in a new light. Our Christian knowledge does not change the meaning of the Old Testament, but gives it new significance.

There is a widespread view that the Old Testament is inferior or sub-standard but the New Testament corrects it. Some people seem to think that God did not do a very good job with the Old Testament system, but when Jesus came he tried again and this time got everything right. Christians may not express their feelings so crudely, though many feel distinctly uncomfortable with the Old Testament and largely ignore it. Yet when we quote

verses from the New Testament that speak of the Scriptures as inspired and authoritative, the expression ‘the Scriptures’ refers to the Old Testament. It is the Old Testament that is able to lead us to salvation, teach us God’s truth, train us in right conduct and equip us for worthwhile living (2 Tim 3:15-17; cf. Matt 22:29).

The Old Testament is imperfect only in the sense that it is incomplete; it is not imperfect in the sense that it is incorrect. The New Testament does not correct the Old Testament, but completes it – brings it to fulfilment, perfection, finality. There is harmony between the Old Testament and the New. God’s activity in making known his plan of salvation and bringing it to completion was progressive and consistent. When the new era arrived in Jesus Christ, God did not need to correct anything he had said or done previously.

For an illustration of this truth, think of the building of a house. The builder works to a plan. He puts down a foundation, builds up the walls and puts up the framing for the roof. Like the Old Testament revelation, the house at this stage is imperfect, for it is incomplete, but there is nothing wrong with it. Each part is correctly built and has its purpose. But the work of building keeps moving ahead and eventually the house is completed. The builder has not had to demolish anything he built in the early stages of construction; he has simply brought his work to completion and fulfilment – as God has done through Jesus Christ and the New Testament revelation.

This helps us understand what the New Testament writers meant when they referred to the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New. For them, fulfilment did not mean merely that Old Testament predictions had come true, as if their main concern was to show how clever their ancestors were at predicting the future. Rather the fulfilment they saw was the completion of a plan that God had been working out for the human race through the history of Israel. Now that the plan had come to fulfilment in Jesus, they saw a significance in Old Testament statements and events that people of former times may not have realized (e.g. Matt 4:14-16; 12:17-21).

To demonstrate this, let us go back to our illustration of the building of a house. With one particular room, the builder set up the walls to make the room four metres square, as shown on the plan. He knew what he was doing and he did it correctly. Now that the house is finished, we learn that the owner of the house has been secretly making a magnificent floor covering that is exactly four metres square and is to go in that room. The builder did not know about the floor covering when he was building the house, but the owner did, and that was why he designed the room to be four metres square. What the Old Testament writers wrote had meaning in its own day, but it gained greater significance when the New Testament writers saw how God had been working. He had worked with his plan before him, and now he brought his purposes to fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

Since the New Testament fulfils the Old, we too shall find more meaning in the New Testament when we have a better understanding of the Old. In the same way we shall find more meaning in the Old Testament when we have a better understanding of the New. The climax of God's progressive revelation is in the New Testament, and specifically in Jesus Christ. And because of him, we see not only the Old Testament in a new light, but the whole of history.

## Helping others

### **A basis for confidence**

Once we have a right approach to interpreting the Bible, we have laid the foundation on which to build our preaching and teaching. Our concern in this book is not with the techniques of preaching in general, but with the specific issue of helping people understand the Bible in the form God gave it – and we cannot do this unless we ourselves have first understood it in the form God gave it.

Not all Christians have the necessary gift to be preachers in church, and not all who are preachers use their gifts as well as they might. In their efforts to make their preaching interesting, they may use a variety of techniques, many of which unfortunately involve decreasing the amount of biblical text they deal with. They might even privately question the value of preaching, feeling that they cannot compete with all the discussions, interviews, questions, dramas and films that play such a large part in present-day communications. Yet good preaching will always have a relevance and authority, regardless of the changes that occur in society. It is a necessary part of the church's life, no matter how much the church may benefit from other forms of communication.

### **Preaching and teaching**

As we think about how best to explain the Bible, we should not make a sharp distinction between preaching and teaching. The two functions are so closely related that there is often little difference between them. From examples in the Bible we learn that the same person may be both a preacher and a teacher (Matt 4:23; Acts 15:35; 2 Tim 4:2).

The biblical examples show that the functions of preaching and teaching cover a range of activities and at times appear to be interchangeable. Sometimes preaching is specifically concerned

with proclamation, as, for example, in announcing God's good news to those who need it (Luke 4:18; Acts 8:4,12,40; 1 Thess 2:9), while teaching is more concerned with instruction in Christian truth and behaviour (Acts 20:20; 1 Cor 4:17; Col 2:7). But teaching is also necessary for those who do not believe (Luke 4:31-32; Acts 4:2; 2 Tim 2:24-26), and preaching the great facts of the gospel is still necessary to challenge believers (Rom 1:15-16; 16:25).

In these studies we shall not therefore make a sharp distinction between preaching and teaching. Our main concern here is not with evangelism (that is, reaching the non-Christian community with the gospel) but with preaching in church. Even there, however, to preach Christ is to preach the gospel, for the message that centres on him is one of hope (2 Cor 4:5-6).

### **What authority does the preacher have?**

God wants men and women to learn about him, to know him personally and to be instructed in his purposes for them. He has therefore revealed himself to the world. He may have spoken in various ways in Old Testament times, but with the coming of Jesus he spoke dramatically through a person who was God in human form (John 1:1,14; Heb 1:1-2). God has also spoken through the Scriptures. He has given a written revelation of himself that can be spread around the world, so that people in any era and any country may learn about him and know him personally (2 Tim 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21).

Since God has given these Scriptures to his people, we who teach them have a special responsibility to God. In explaining and applying his Word, we are acting as his representatives. We are, in a sense, the ones to whom God has entrusted his revelation, and therefore we must be careful how we use it. This seems to be what Paul has in mind when he refers to himself and his fellow preachers as 'servants' or 'stewards' who have been entrusted with God's truth. They must therefore be 'faithful' or 'trustworthy' (1 Cor 4:1-2). Preachers must make known God's Word in a way that is true to its meaning and at the same time beneficial to the hearers.

When we preach, we are revealers and announcers of a message that is not our own, yet we must treat that message as if it were our own. We do more than merely pass on someone else's message; we teach our hearers, passing on the challenge that we ourselves have experienced.

If we follow Paul's example, we shall teach all of God's message, and not hold back from declaring anything that will be helpful to the hearers. We teach the Word, but through the teaching we bring the encouragement, warning and challenge that the Word contains (Acts 20:20,27). By preaching, we are claiming a certain authority, but the authority is that of the Word we proclaim. It is not an authority to say whatever we wish or to force our opinions on a silent congregation.

An Old Testament prophet might say, 'Thus says the Lord' (Amos 2:4-6), and Jesus might say, 'I say to you' (Matt 5:27-28), but we today should be cautious in giving divine authority to our own pronouncements. We should do well to include ourselves in any challenge we might make, using 'we' and 'us' rather than 'you'; for we are under the same authority as our audience. We should do better to say, 'We have a responsibility to take the gospel to our neighbours' than to say, 'You have a responsibility to take the gospel to your neighbours'.

In developing the habit of including ourselves in our rebukes and challenges, we are likely to become more humble and less judgmental. We must always remember that the Bible, not the pulpit, is the source of the preacher's authority.

As preachers, we may be authoritative but we should not be authoritarian. That is, we may speak with power and assurance because of the Word we preach, but we must not treat our hearers as if they ought to respond in unquestioning obedience to whatever we say. We have the right to aim for a spiritual response to the Word we preach, but we have no right to force people to accept our private opinions.

Neither should we try to excite or frighten the congregation in an attempt to achieve a certain kind of response. We should aim rather to explain the plain meaning of the Bible and show its

practical relevance. Such preaching may not impress those who are looking for entertainment, but for most people it will have a good and lasting effect. The majority of those who attend church will appreciate a sermon that helps them understand the Bible better.

### **First the meaning, then the application**

Our basic responsibility in teaching the Bible is to understand the portion we are dealing with and pass on its meaning to the hearers. Naturally, we want to preach a message that is of pastoral benefit to the hearers, but we should not overlook our duty to explain what the portion of Scripture meant in its historical context. Any application must be consistent with the biblical author's purpose. We must allow the Bible to say what it wants to say, regardless of what we might like it to say.

Once people properly understand the Bible, they find that it makes its own impact upon them. Although it arose out of events in the distant past, it is living and active today (Heb 4:12). In every era the Bible does its unique work in people's lives. It still speaks, not in the sense that each verse contains a special message for each Christian, but in the sense that the words of the living God reveal truths that can instruct people in any generation.

However, not all who hear the Bible explained will be as alert as preachers might hope, and they may not see how the words of the Bible apply to them. As we preach we should not only explain the portion of Scripture before us, but should also help our hearers by suggesting its significance for them. But we must not *force* the portion to teach lessons, even though we might think they are lessons the audience needs. We have to submit to the Bible, not tell it what to do.

It is more important to interpret the Scriptures correctly than to have correct preaching techniques. That is not to say that we should ignore training and advice concerning the practical aspects of preaching (more about this in the chapters that follow), but we must remember that, above all, what determines the worth of our preaching is its content.

### The Bible opened up to view

In the Jewish synagogue, the custom was to read the Scriptures and then preach a sermon that explained those Scriptures in a way that helped the audience. This is sometimes referred to as expository preaching. An exposition is something that ‘exposes’ the Scriptures – opens them up so that people can see what they mean. This seems to be what Jesus did in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21) and what Paul did in the synagogue at Antioch (Acts 13:14-16). They expounded (or explained) the Scriptures, so that people understood their meaning and saw their significance.

The early church followed the synagogue practice, but added the writings of the apostles to the Old Testament. The church accepted the apostles’ teachings as having the same authority as ‘the other Scriptures’ (1 Cor 14:37; 1 Thess 5:27; 2 Peter 3:15-16). The exposition of Scripture and the teaching of Christian belief and practice thus became the two chief elements in the preaching of the early church (2 Thess 2:15; 1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 2:2,15). This should still be so today. Biblical preaching, whether of a book, a part of a book, or a topic, should be expository. It should open up the Scriptures to view. It should bring out the meaning.

Expository preaching does not mean (in the case of a portion of Scripture) that we must go through the portion verse by verse or word by word, as if we are reading a commentary or textbook to the audience. Nor does it mean (in the case of a topic) that we must read a selection of isolated verses, as if our only concern is to find biblical support for our ideas. Rather it means that the Bible is the message. Most of the preaching time will be spent dealing with the Scriptures. Challenges, warnings, rebukes and encouragements may occupy part of the time, but only a small part. The power is in the Bible, not the preacher.

### Relating the past to the present

Although people may be interested to know what the Bible meant to its original readers, they also want to know how the Bible can help *them*. Therefore, our exposition of Scripture,

while being faithful to the biblical context, should also bear upon the everyday lives of the hearers.

This means that when we preach we must have more than an understanding of the Bible. We must have a working knowledge of the needs, trends, problems and other issues of present-day life. We must know how people think and feel, and be able to speak to them in ordinary everyday language. Preaching must be related to the real world where people live.

The Bible will not give a clear-cut answer to every issue people face in today's world. It will not tell us where we should live, what occupation we should follow, how many children we should have or how we should manage our finances. But people in Bible times faced problems also – problems of family, work, disease, poverty, injustice, politics, crime and so on – and the Bible writers had plenty to say about these problems. As we explain what God said about such matters in Bible times, we can offer teaching and guidelines for today's society.

Preaching of this kind keeps the Bible true to its meaning and makes it relevant to today. It also avoids several mistakes. One is the mistake of reading the Bible as merely a document of history, as if it were no different from any other ancient writing. Another is the mistake of ignoring what the Bible meant to its first readers in order to find an answer to any problem we might ask it. Yet another mistake is that of thinking only about the spiritual aspects of Christianity as an excuse for ignoring the realities of everyday life. The Bible certainly gives spiritual strength amid difficulties, but it does not encourage us to think about our glorious future as a way of escaping present responsibilities.

### **Long-term aims**

Expository teaching, besides helping people avoid certain mistakes, has the positive benefit of helping them develop a Christian view of life. Christians want to know how to handle the issues they meet in the workaday world, and they will be equipped to do this through learning to think 'christianly'. A knowledge of the Bible will change their way of thinking. They

will be transformed by the renewing of their minds, and so will be able to know God's will for them in the various circumstances they meet (Rom 12:2).

The Bible works constantly within those who study it, changing their values to be more like God's and influencing their decisions so that they please him. As preachers we can help this process of change by dealing with books from all parts of the Bible, and thereby giving the audience a wider view of God's activity in human affairs.

We sometimes hear people say, 'We want preaching that is relevant to us now; we want something that can help us in our day to day lives.' That is a worthy desire, but with it there is a hidden danger. We may be so concerned to preach on matters of immediate relevance that we limit ourselves to the parts of the Bible that appear to satisfy those needs. This could be short-sighted, because it encourages Christians to concentrate on the needs of the moment, often at the expense of that all-round development that is necessary for a healthy Christian life.

Suppose, for instance, that in reading the Bible I meet parts that touch on the subject of physical suffering – why it afflicts those who apparently do not deserve it, how people deal with their pain, what chances they have for miraculous healing, and the like. These matters may be of no immediate relevance to me, because I am healthy and fit. This has been the case throughout my life, and the difficult questions about human suffering are to me largely theoretical.

But nobody knows the future. Suppose there is a sudden change in my health, or I meet with a crippling accident, or someone close to me is suddenly struck with a deadly disease. If I have skipped over parts of the Bible that seemed irrelevant to my circumstances at the time, I shall be ill-equipped to handle different circumstances when they arise. My demand that teaching be relevant *now* has been short-sighted, and my concern that it be relevant to *me* has been selfish. Besides not equipping myself to face the future, I have not prepared myself to help others.

The Bible should not be treated as if it were simply a first aid kit, designed to provide instant attention for urgent problems. True, it may provide the most unexpected help in times of crisis, but the most common biblical picture of the Bible is that of food. It is something that builds and strengthens the body, so that the person grows to a healthy maturity (1 Cor 3:2; Heb 5:12-14; 1 Peter 2:2).

If people are fed a diet of preaching that does no more than deal with topics of current interest, they will be restricted in their spiritual growth. Instead of moving ahead towards a strong and mature Christian life, they will probably stumble from one crisis to the next. One responsibility of preachers is to equip, strengthen and build up their hearers (1 Cor 3:10; 14:5,20,26; Eph 4:11-16). An ancient proverb says that wise people store up knowledge (Prov 10:14), and wise preachers will help their hearers build up a fund of biblical knowledge upon which they can draw as they travel through life.

## Preparing the sermon

### **Preachers as learners**

If we are to teach others, we ourselves must first be learners. We must be consistent students of the Bible who have a thorough knowledge of whatever biblical book or subject we teach. But our Bible study should not just be concerned with preparing sermons. We should study the Bible consistently, book by book, subject by subject, whether or not the material we study is likely to be used in a sermon. When the time comes to prepare our sermons, our problem should not be that we have difficulty gathering enough material, but that we have so much material we have difficulty knowing what to leave out.

Our preparation should involve not only consistent study, but also personal examination and prayer. Like God's preachers in ancient times, we should make God's Word our own before giving it out to others. We should not merely repeat something that means little to us personally.

When God used Ezekiel to speak to the people of Israel, Ezekiel had first to carry out the symbolic act of eating the scroll that contained God's words. God's message became his message, and he proclaimed it with conviction and feeling (Ezek 2:8-3:3). John had a similar experience in New Testament times (Rev 10:8-11), and in a sense all preachers should have a similar experience today. God's Word must become part of us, till his message becomes ours. Then, like Jeremiah, we shall have such a burning desire to make it known to others that we shall scarcely be able to keep it back (Jer 20:8-9).

### **The practical purpose**

If we truly believe in what we say, people will soon notice. They will also be more likely to act upon what they hear. Our aim, therefore, should be firstly to inform them as clearly as we can what God's Word teaches, and secondly to suggest how it

might apply to them. This should always be our overall purpose. Within this overall purpose we may want to deal with specific issues, though these will depend on the needs of the occasion and the composition of the audience.

This reminds us that we should read as widely as possible, not just biblical reference material but secular literature as well. Through newspapers, books, magazines, films, radio, television, conversations and involvement in community affairs, we shall have a better understanding of the issues that concern people.

Different audiences have different needs, and the way we deal with a biblical book or subject may vary from one audience to the next. Even before we begin preparing a sermon, we should find out all we can about the composition and size of the audience we are to address. Then we shall know how to handle our subject, what level of understanding to expect, and what obstacles we are likely to meet. The reason we adjust to suit the audience is not to win people's approval by saying things they like to hear, but to ensure that we deal with the subject in a way that is understandable and relevant.

### **Making a start**

Whether the sermon deals with a topic or expounds a portion of Scripture, the preparation will involve reading, rereading and thinking over the biblical material. Our starting point is always the Bible, and we should read it in whatever translations or versions are available. We should also read the writings of God-given teachers who have made the fruits of their work available in the form of commentaries and other helpful books.

As we read these books, we should mark those parts that give us useful information and ideas. If we are among those who do not like to leave permanent marks on books, we can use a soft pencil so that any marks can later be removed.

We should also keep with us at all times some notepaper. We can use this to write down observations from our Bible reading, and ideas that occur to us as we think, pray and read about our subject. This paper can also be used to record reference details of

helpful material (e.g. title of the book or article, author, date, publisher, page numbers). We can later transfer these details to an index, which will enable us to find helpful material in the future.

It is probably good to have one index for material that is best filed according to a Bible reference (e.g. name of biblical book, chapter and verse), and another for material that is best filed in alphabetical order of subject matter (e.g. disciple, forgiveness, Holy Spirit, synagogue). With a little discipline and care, these reference indexes will grow rapidly. They will require reorganizing as our knowledge increases, but they will be a valuable source of help as our ministry expands.

From the hours we spend reading the Bible and associated resource material, we shall build up our knowledge of the subject we are to preach on. But our understanding and confidence will not come just through collecting information. We must also evaluate the information and form our own judgments concerning its accuracy and usefulness.

If we begin this introductory preparation weeks, or even months, before preaching the sermon, we shall benefit through having ample time to think over the material. Sometimes we meet an idea or statement that appears smart or clever, but there is a danger in deciding hastily to include it in our sermon. After further reflection we may find it is not accurate or balanced, and consequently not as useful as we first thought.

### **Putting pen to paper**

Having made some preparation through reading and thinking about our subject in general, we then have the task of selecting and assembling the material to use in the sermon. During our reading, we may have become aware of themes or ideas, and so can write down headings for parts of the sermon. From two to six headings will usually be enough. If no headings are obvious, we must think out a logical progression as we move along. There is no secret technique that enables us to prepare the sections or headings of a sermon, but as we think through the material the main points will emerge in one way or another.

In transferring the fruits of our study to the content of the sermon, we should write out our findings and observations in our own words. In doing so we shall draw upon some of the material we have marked in our resource books. We shall probably not use every portion we have marked, perhaps because it does not relate to our theme, or perhaps because our extended study has caused us to doubt its worth. As we use or reject marked portions, we can remove the pencil marks and return the books to the shelves. We are then free to work over the material, rearranging, deleting, adding and explaining in our own style and words, without reference to the resource books.

Although we benefit from other people's writings, we should not merely repeat them. Our primary concern is with the Bible, not with books that people write about the Bible. The sermon should get its flavour, purpose, unity and emphasis from our own biblical insights and practical experiences. If our sermons are to carry weight with the hearers, they should arise from our personal convictions, and not simply copy someone else's ideas. Sermons that are second-hand lack genuineness.

We must be careful not to include too much in the sermon. Sometimes we get so enthused about a subject we are studying that we are tempted to pass on all our findings to our hearers. But they may not be interested in every detail we have discovered. We must restrict ourselves to matters that can be of most benefit to them in the limited preaching time available.

The more material we gather the better, because familiarity with our subject will give us confidence when preaching. We do not, however, have to use all the material we have collected from our research. If the material in the sermon is, for example, only a quarter of what we have researched, we are more likely to feel confident about the subject, and consequently more relaxed and assured when preaching about it.

### **The value of writing**

Written English is not the same as spoken English. The purpose of written preparation is not to produce a word-perfect version of the sermon to memorize (something that is neither

desirable nor possible for most people), but to clarify our thoughts. If we are unable to write an idea down, and if we cannot write it in plain language that anyone can understand, we have probably not understood it properly ourselves. Whatever we want to pass on to our audience, we must find a way of saying it as clearly and simply as possible.

In general there is no need to use a difficult word when an easier one is available. We could, for example, use ‘try’ instead of ‘endeavour’, ‘happen’ instead of ‘eventuate’, and ‘workable’ instead of ‘viable’. Nevertheless, the preacher’s vocabulary must be accurate and should have variety. We should equip ourselves with at least one good dictionary and if possible other books that deal with the usage and meanings of words.

Our sentences should be simple rather than complicated, our style straightforward rather than abstract, and our expressions practical rather than academic. It is better to say ‘We must always tell the truth’ than ‘Truth is a necessary attribute’. We should also work hard at finding ways to explain or replace biblical words that people in church may hear often but not understand. Certain words, such as ‘sin’ and ‘salvation’, cannot be avoided, but we must make sure people understand what we mean when we use them.

This need for explanation applies even more to words such as ‘justification’ and ‘redemption’, but once we have explained them we can use alternative words or phrases. If an accurate modern equivalent of an old fashioned word is available, we should use the modern word wherever possible; for instance, ‘the sinful human nature’ rather than ‘the flesh’.

Writing will also make us aware of unnecessary words we sometimes use when speaking and will help us eliminate them. It will make us think critically about ourselves and will help us in our constant battle to eliminate traditional preacher’s language. Some words and expressions have become part of a style of speech heard in the church but rarely heard in the everyday world; e.g. ‘in our room and stead’, ‘journeying mercies’, ‘each and every one’, ‘return thanks’, ‘render praise’, ‘the person of’

and the repetitive ‘just’. We should try to use words and expressions that are common to people in general.

### **Applying the teaching**

The twofold purpose of the sermon should be to inform the hearers of the Bible’s teaching and show its significance for them. The statement of the teaching’s significance is usually called the application. The preacher ‘applies’ the teaching to the everyday situation of the hearers by giving a lesson, challenge or example that makes it relevant to them.

We should look for opportunities to work in applications throughout the sermon, but no application should be forced in. We need not attach an application to every biblical or theological explanation. But if we explain the Bible properly, applications will be so obvious that people will see them naturally. They may even wonder why they had not seen them before.

Applications are often more effective when we make only a brief but pointed comment or question that arises out of the biblical material (e.g. ‘. . . and it seems to me that Zephaniah’s question is one that we might well ask ourselves today . . .’). We must treat our hearers as intelligent enough to draw certain conclusions for themselves. If we over-emphasize what we have already made clear, the effect on the audience may be the opposite of what we hoped for. We should be careful not to insult our hearers by ‘talking down’ to them.

Wherever possible we should give examples to show how a biblical exhortation might be applied in everyday life. Jesus did this in Matthew 25:34-45 when he explained that serving him meant feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, being hospitable to the lonely and helping those with special needs. He did it again in Luke 10:27-37 when responding to a teacher of the Jewish law who asked him for an explanation of the word ‘neighbour’. Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan and then said to the man, ‘Now you go and do the same’.

The first century preachers likewise gave practical applications of the principles they taught. When James taught

Christians to be unbiased in their treatment of people, he emphasized the point by giving an illustration of their wrong behaviour. They looked down on those who were not socially respectable, but gave a special welcome to the wealthy (James 2:1-7). When John taught his readers to love their fellow Christians, he pointed out that this meant giving goods and money to those in need (1 John 3:16-17).

Today's preachers should follow the example of those first century preachers. We must constantly think of practical up-to-date applications of the Word we teach. This will help us avoid the tendency to rely upon favourite or well-used applications, some of which may have little to do with everyday experience.

### **The use of illustrations**

Besides giving mental relief to the hearers, illustrations keep the sermon tied to the workaday world. But they must be relevant to the biblical portion or teaching that we are expounding. Also, they should as a rule be designed to illustrate one point only. If we try to draw too many points from one illustration, we may land in trouble. The New Testament examples given above show that in some cases we might give an illustration and then draw a principle from it; in others, state the principle and then give an illustration.

We should beware of the temptation to tell a story solely because it is entertaining. It may capture people's attention, but can be damaging to the sermon as a whole. If people remember a story but cannot remember the point it was intended to illustrate, the illustration has failed. In this regard we must be especially careful with stories of the unusual or the spectacular. The more sensational the story, the less typical it is of ordinary life. As a result people are less likely to see how it relates to them.

### **Some Old Testament examples**

If we spend most of our sermon time expounding the text of the Bible, we shall need fewer illustrations than we might think. This is because the Bible itself is full of illustrations. It deals with real life situations. Its language is pictorial.

To many people, one of the least interesting parts of the Bible is the law of Moses, yet even there most situations should be easy to picture – a slave working in a house (Exod 21:1-6), one man beating another (Exod 21:12-14), people quarrelling (Exod 21:18-19), an ox attacking someone (Exod 21:28-29), an animal falling into a pit (Exod 21:33), a thief breaking into a house (Exod 22:2), a farmer burning off his field (Exod 22:6). The historical books are similarly concerned with events in real life, and their narratives are full of interest and colour. The biblical material itself is so down-to-earth that we rarely need to search elsewhere for illustrations to enliven it.

Even the Psalms, which contain some of the highest expressions of spiritual devotion, are earthy in the images they use. Most are easy for us to picture – groups of people talking (Ps 1:1), trees growing beside a river (Ps 1:3), chaff blown away by the wind (Ps 1:4), rebels plotting to overthrow a ruler (Ps 2:2), chains being broken (Ps 2:3), pottery being smashed (Ps 2:9), and so on in verse after verse, psalm after psalm.

In the Wisdom books the pictures and illustrations are even more colourful. There we might see a prostitute laying a trap for a young man (Prov 7:6-23), a rich woman preparing a banquet (Prov 9:1-6), or a person stirring up trouble in his neighbourhood (Prov 26:17-25). We shall find illustrations in such common local practices as setting a bird trap (Prov 1:17), talking about the weather (Prov 25:13-14) and making announcements around the streets and markets (Prov 1:20-22).

The prophets of the Old Testament were preachers, and their sermons were colourful and well illustrated. One chapter will commonly contain a number of pictures – farm animals (Isa 1:3), a diseased person (Isa 1:5-6), devastated countryside (Isa 1:7), a shed in a vegetable patch (Isa 1:8), a besieged city (Isa 1:8), religious festivals (Isa 1:11-15), bathing (Isa 1:16-18), widows, prostitutes, princes, thieves (Isa 1:21-23), refining of metals (Isa 1:22,25), dead trees (Isa 1:30) and burnt rubbish (Isa 1:31).

These Old Testament examples do more than remind us of the need to relate our message to the world around us; they show

us that if we explain the Bible as it is written, our sermons will automatically be packed with everyday illustrations. We shall not have to search for pictures to enliven our sermons; the pictures are already there in the Bible.

We must acquire the habit of seeing in our imagination the pictures that the biblical writers have set out on paper. As we describe those pictures and their significance, our hearers will find the words of the Bible spring to life before them. We shall have little need to think of interesting illustrations or stories to hold people's attention, because the Bible will do it for us. Instead of entertaining our hearers with stories or attacking them with criticisms, we can open up the Bible with our explanations and then leave the Bible to speak for itself.

### **Jesus and the New Testament writers**

When we come to the New Testament, we find that Jesus used word pictures constantly. We shall help our hearers understand Jesus' teaching if we first use our imagination to picture the features Jesus referred to. Instead of making Jesus' teaching more abstract, we should keep it concrete and practical. We should use Jesus' material in such a way that it now becomes the material for our own sermons.

If Jesus spoke of a woman baking bread (Matt 13:33) or a farmer organizing his affairs (Matt 21:33-41), we should be able to make our hearers picture the scene. We may want a spiritual lesson for our hearers, but there is no need to divorce Jesus' activity from the real world in which he lived. Our spiritual lessons should not be artificial, but should arise from the workaday world of Jesus' experience. In general he moved among the same sorts of people as we might meet in our local neighbourhood.

Even the great words of Christian doctrine come mostly from settings in the everyday world. The background to Paul's teaching on justification is the courtroom, where a judge acquits the innocent but condemns the guilty (Rom 3:26; 8:33). The background to his teaching on adoption is the practice whereby a childless couple made a trustworthy person their son, and gave

him the status of a responsible adult and heir (Gal 3:26; 4:4-6). In presenting Christian truth, the Bible usually prefers concrete word pictures to abstract theological statements.

Likewise we today can communicate effectively with our hearers, even when teaching doctrine, merely by explaining the biblical pictures. If we feel the necessity for further illustrations, we can give illustrations from the present day. We should bear in mind, however, that usually the most effective illustrations are analogies rather than stories; that is, pictures that liken one thing to another rather than narratives of events. Many of the Bible's illustrations are analogies. Concerning redemption, for example, the analogy comes from the practice of slavery. As a person pays a price to release a slave from bondage, so Jesus Christ, by his death, has paid the price to release believers from the slavery of sin (Gal 3:13; 5:1; 1 Peter 1:18-19).

It seems that people today are less skilled than those of Bible times at using their imagination to picture truth (perhaps because there is so much ready-made entertainment today). We must therefore paint the picture for them as we preach. More than that, we must practise painting mental pictures for ourselves as we read. If we cannot picture what we are talking about, there is little chance that our hearers will be able to.

### Pulpit notes

We all have different preferences concerning the extent of notes we take with us into the pulpit. Whether hand-written or typed, the notes must be set out clearly so that we can read them easily at a glance. Simple helps such as underlining, coloured markings, indentation of lines and extra spacing will enable us to move through our notes with a minimum of difficulty.

As pointed out earlier, an important factor in fluent and confident preaching is familiarity with our subject. Nothing can substitute for this. If we have researched our material well and preserved the substance of the sermon in writing, we shall probably need to take only one or two pages of outline notes with us into the pulpit. The notes are merely to jog the memory, so that we progress through the material in the right order and

without omitting important points. We shall usually find it worthwhile, however, to write out or memorize key statements where we need to say something with particular precision.

This writing out or memorizing of important statements applies especially to the opening and closing sentences of the sermon. We are usually nervous when we begin to speak, but if we have prepared our opening sentence we should be able to begin confidently. The sentence does not have to be anything special; the main thing is to know what we are going to say when we speak our first words.

In some cases the introduction may be based on a striking illustration or statement that creates immediate interest, but it must lead genuinely into the main subject matter. If it does not, it can create an anti-climax and the audience will soon lose interest. The closing statement might be based on a challenge, a question or a quotation from Scripture, but again it must fit naturally into what has gone before. It need not summarize the sermon, but it should provide a natural climax.

Headings can be helpful to both preacher and audience, but they should be short and in keeping with the content and development of the sermon. They should be down-to-earth rather than abstract (e.g. 'Getting on with people' rather than 'The nature of coexistence'), and popular rather than technical (e.g. 'God is everywhere' rather than 'Divine immanence').

A simple pattern can be helpful to link headings, but only if it fits naturally into the substance of the sermon. Our aim as preachers should be that people understand the teaching of the Bible, not that they remember our sermon outlines. In certain cases, though we may have prepared three or four major points, we need not announce them. Everything depends on how we want to develop the talk. We must always be flexible in deciding how to present our material.

### Possibilities for re-use

Having put so much work into our study and preparation, we should file our material away for possible use in the future. This

applies particularly to the more detailed notes that record the substance of the sermon. Even if we do not preach the same sermon again, we may use some of the material in other sermons or studies.

We may also wish to file the brief notes that we took with us into the pulpit, though this is not so important. If we prepared these notes specifically for one occasion or simply to jog the memory, we may need to rewrite them next time we use the material. Such rewriting can be beneficial, because it forces us to rethink the current practical applications of the basic biblical teaching, and so keeps the sermon fresh and relevant.

No study of any subject is ever complete, and therefore we must be willing to change parts of the sermon that we have written out or even preached. We shall need to adjust the content and emphasis as our knowledge grows and the audience changes. Some sermons may reach maturity only after we have preached them two or three times; though if we preach them too often we may find they become stale. We should also keep a record of where and when we preach each sermon.

## Reaching the audience

### **God's Word, not ours**

No matter how much thought and effort we put into the preparation and delivery of a sermon, we must constantly bear in mind that the spiritual power of the message comes from God, not from us. We must be dependent upon God, and we express our dependence through constant prayer.

Paul reminded the Thessalonian Christians that one reason for the fruit he saw among them was that his message ‘came not only in word, but also in power, in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction’ (1 Thess 1:5). In Corinth he was again fruitful, even though his preaching lacked its usual fluency and confidence. But he was not disappointed. At least the Corinthians’ faith was genuine, because it rested not on the skill of his preaching, but on the truth of the message he preached. It depended not on human wisdom, but on God’s power (1 Cor 2:1-5).

Our authority as preachers is only that of the Word we preach; our power is only that of the Spirit of God who works through us. And we draw upon that power through prayer.

Clearly, we must do our best to perform well. We should not be content to stumble along, making such a mess of our presentation that people have difficulty listening. On the other hand, we should not be so concerned to produce a first class performance that our main aim (though we do not admit it) is to impress people. The value is in the Word, not the preacher; or, as Paul might say, it is in the spiritual treasure, not the clay pot that contains it. The power belongs to God, not to us (2 Cor 4:7).

### **True to the Scriptures**

Besides fighting the tendency to vanity, we must resist the temptation to adjust our message so that we tell people what they want to hear. The Bible consistently condemns preachers who

are more concerned with pleasing the audience than proclaiming the truth. It calls them false prophets (Isa 30:10-11; 2 Tim 4:3). They may for a time avoid difficulties and enjoy popularity, but in the end they damage themselves and their hearers (1 Kings 22:13; Jer 5:31; 23:16-22). True messengers of God say what they should say, whether or not it is what people want them to say (1 Kings 22:14; Jer 1:17; Micah 3:8; 2 Tim 4:2).

This does not mean we should be harsh or insensitive in our preaching. To speak forthrightly does not mean to speak arrogantly. Jesus taught the way of God forthrightly and told the truth without worrying about people's opinions or status (Mark 12:14). Yet his words and manner were gracious and impressive (Luke 4:22; John 7:46).

People in the church have a variety of needs. The stubborn need to be rebuked and the lazy need to be warned, whereas the timid need to be encouraged and the sorrowful need to be comforted (Rom 12:7-8; 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Tim 2:24-26). But whatever message we preach, we must be honest in the way we interpret and apply God's Word. We must never twist it to make it mean something different from what the biblical author intended. Like Paul, we must not be deceitful or distort God's Word, but by the open statement of the truth commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God (2 Cor 4:2).

In view of the variety of people in the congregation, one way to ensure balance in our preaching is to have a program that covers all parts of the Bible. (This is discussed in Chapter 12.) An advantage of such a program is that, as we move through whole books of the Bible, we inevitably cover a range of topics. In the process we deal with needs in the church, while avoiding the undesirable practice of directing a public sermon at only selected people. Also, in the course of expounding a book, we can often deal with a subject that may be difficult to deal with in an isolated sermon.

### **From the audience's viewpoint**

As we take our place in the pulpit, we are 'warmed up' on the subject we are to preach about. Our hearers, by contrast, are

'cold'. While our minds are full of the material we have been studying and rehearsing, the minds of our hearers may not be prepared at all. When people arrive in church, they are unlikely to have just studied the subject as we have, and may never have thought about things that are clear and settled in our minds. We must therefore take time, if only two or three minutes, to present a background that enables the audience to see how we view the subject and how we intend to handle it.

In addition, we must realize that if questions arose in our minds as we prepared the sermon, similar questions might arise in our hearers' minds as we preach. We should imagine, and even mention, possible arguments and objections, then answer them. We could introduce a statement by an expression such as 'Now you might say . . .' and then proceed to deal with it.

This is what Paul does in his writings: 'What advantage, then, has the Jew? Much every way . . .' (Rom 3:1-2). 'What if some were unfaithful? Does their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? By no means . . .' (Rom 3:3-4). 'What shall we say, then? Shall we continue in sin so that grace may abound? By no means! We died to sin. How, then, can we continue to live in it?' (Rom 6:1-2).

The Old Testament preacher Malachi uses a similar technique when challenging his hearers about their wrong attitudes. He addresses them with a statement, quotes their complaining response, and then answers them. In Malachi 1:6, speaking on God's behalf, he accuses people of despising God's name. The people, in a complaining tone of voice, ask, 'How have we despised your name?' Malachi, answering for God, says, 'By offering polluted food on my altar,' to which the people respond, again in hurt tones, 'How have we polluted it?' Malachi then proceeds through the following verses to tell them.

Malachi uses this approach repeatedly. In Malachi 2:17, for example, he tells the people they have wearied God with their words, to which the people respond, 'How have we wearied him?' Malachi answers, 'By saying that God likes those who do evil, and by asking where is this God who is supposed to be

just.' He then deals with the issue through the next chapter. If we can use this sort of imaginary debate, we shall find it maintains our hearers' interest and helps develop the sermon.

### **Composition of the audience**

We should remember that although we may see how a portion of Scripture applies in everyday life, others may not see the application so readily. Circumstances vary from one person to the next, and the needs of some are not the needs of others. The audience usually consists of a mixture of people – young and old, male and female, tradesmen and students, and so on. We should be careful not to concentrate on matters that may be of interest to only a small number of people.

Another thing to avoid is the over-generalization, for it can alienate people concerning whom it may not be true. For example, a broad criticism of youth is unfair to those who do not deserve it. A broad commendation is also unhelpful, because it can create a false sense of self-satisfaction.

Since no two people are the same, we must be careful in wording our applications and challenges. We should word a statement or ask a question in such a way that it prompts different responses from different people. This helps people think about the particular response *they* should make. When Jesus told the parable about the vineyard workers who rebelled against the owner, he did so in a way that made the hearers think about its meaning and application. As they did so, they realized 'that he had told the parable against them' (Mark 12:12).

When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he told them this was an example of humble service that they were to follow, though the practical expression of that service would vary from person to person (John 13:12-17). If we are preaching about serving others, we can give examples of self-sacrifice, whether of status, ambition, convenience or independence; but we cannot dictate a specific response for every person. We must encourage people to work out their own responses. This is what Jesus did when he told the story of the good Samaritan to a Jewish teacher – 'Go and do likewise' (Luke 10:29,37). The man had seen one

application of the teaching; now he had to make others for himself.

Another point to bear in mind is not to make a sweeping statement where the hearers may think of an obvious exception. We should not, for example, make assertions that the righteous always prosper, prayers are always answered, or hardship is always the result of personal sin. If our hearers think of cases where such is not the case, they may conclude that our preaching lacks credibility and so take no more notice of us.

We should also double-check our facts if we give illustrations from areas of life where we have little knowledge or experience. Suppose we know little about farming, but we hear a story about farming that appears to give us a useful illustration. No matter how helpful the illustration appears to be, if we say something about farming that is not true to fact, we shall lose our credibility with any farmers in the audience.

### **Enthusising the audience**

If we are in full view of the audience during the service, we should make sure we look fully involved in the service. If we take genuine interest in what is going on – singing, prayers, testimonies, even announcements – the audience is more likely to take interest in us when our turn arrives.

This involvement in the service also helps to relieve our nervous tension. The more relaxed we are, the better. For this reason some preachers prefer to have no last-minute rereading of notes and no last-minute prayer huddle by the platform party. We should do our rehearsing and praying before we leave home, and then commit ourselves to God in complete trust. We need to keep calm during the time before the church service, and not do anything that might add to our nervousness or cause us to panic. This is also the time to check the lectern, so that we know how to arrange our Bible and notes. Once we get up to speak, it may be too late to make adjustments for an awkward lectern.

Some preachers use jokes, mannerisms or other devices to catch the audience's attention, but such things are not essential.

Unless they fit naturally with our personality, we should avoid them. If we are genuinely enthused about our subject, our hearers will soon notice and will readily get interested. When Jesus expounded the Scriptures to the two disciples on the Emmaus road, he did so with such enthusiasm that the hearts of the disciples ‘burned within them’ (Luke 24:27,32). People become enthused when they see others enthused (2 Cor 9:2). They also take notice of people who believe in their message regardless of the personal cost (Acts 20:31).

### **Content that has life**

There is no need to use gimmicks to ‘brighten up’ the Bible in an effort to maintain the hearers’ interest in it. The reason some people build up a resistance to the Bible is not that the Bible itself is dull or boring, but that Christians in general, and preachers in particular, do not deal with it in a down-to-earth manner. We should all respect the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, but this does not mean we read the Bible as if it no longer speaks in ordinary language. If we are not careful, we may find ourselves reading the Bible with such an artificial sense of awe and wonder that we fail to see how practical it is.

Our respect for the Bible should mean that we do our best to understand and explain exactly what it says. And when we do so, we shall find at times that it speaks in blunt language, uses earthy illustrations and even records some crude stories. Paul is very blunt in the language he uses to attack those who were trying to destroy his work (2 Cor 11:19-21; 12:11-13,20-21; Gal 1:8-10; 5:12); the prophets use earthy illustrations in likening the people’s unfaithfulness to prostitution and other sexual excesses (Ezek 23:1-4,20-21; Hosea 2:1-5); and unpleasant stories ruthlessly expose people’s violence and immorality (Gen 34:1-31; Judg 19:1-21:25).

We should not try to be clever by searching the Bible for colourful parts that will shock the audience, but neither should we mislead the audience by avoiding those parts or giving them unnatural spiritual meanings. We merely explain the Word as its first readers might have understood it. As we do this we shall

find that the Bible has its own liveliness; we do not need to make it lively by adding our own stories. We must see in our mind the picture the writer has painted, and then describe it.

With a little extra thought, however, we can bring a biblical picture up to date by giving a modern equivalent. In Amos 2:13 God says through his spokesman that he will punish the people by crushing them as a fully loaded ox-cart crushes the ground beneath it. Using a modern equivalent, we might say that God will run over them like a ten-tonne truck.

When Isaiah is told to write a message for the people on a clay tablet, we might imagine him today setting up a blackboard outside his house and writing his message on it in chalk (Isa 8:1). When Habakkuk is told to do something similar (though his message is to be in large plain letters that a person passing by can read at a glance; Hab 2:2), we might think today of a roadside sign that a passing motorist can read quickly. Or we might think of the news headlines displayed outside a newspaper shop to catch the attention of those who pass by.

Each of these word pictures requires only a sentence or two as we speak, so it will take up little sermon time, but it will keep the hearers involved in the biblical text we are expounding. More importantly, it will help them understand the Bible in its original setting and relate it to the present day.

Many Old Testament prophets spoke out against oppression and corruption. Present-day readers will have little difficulty in picturing modern equivalents: officials who favour those who give bribes (Micah 7:3), loan-sharks who drive the poor into debt (Amos 2:6-8), politicians who use their position for their own advancement (Isa 22:15-19), business people who cheat defenceless citizens (Amos 8:5-6), leaders who live in luxury but ruin the nation (Jer 22:13-18), and influential rich people who get their own way at the expense of the poor (Amos 5:11-13).

### **Seeing the lighter side**

Although the preachers of the Bible speak forthrightly, we must not imagine them to be ‘up tight’ and constantly frowning.

On the contrary, we may at times find them amusing. They write as ordinary people who display the normal characteristics of speech, such as exaggeration, understatement and irony.

Israelites of Amos's time looked forward to the day of the Lord because they thought it would bring destruction to their enemies and victory to them. Amos corrects this misunderstanding, pointing out that when God acts in judgment he will act against all the wicked, including Israelites. No one will escape. The day of the Lord, he says, is 'as if a person fled from a lion and a bear met him, or went into the house and leaned against the wall and a snake bit him' (Amos 5:18-19). The illustration is short and simple, but most people will not appreciate it unless we explain it.

We should be able to picture what Amos is saying, and then help our hearers see it. A man in the countryside suddenly finds he is about to be attacked by a lion. Panic-stricken, he runs for his life, ducking, weaving, screaming and jumping as he tries to keep free of his attacker. Eventually, the lion gives up the chase, and miraculously the exhausted man escapes – or so he thinks; because just as he is regaining his breath, he sees a bear coming towards him from another direction.

Off goes the man again, this time with the bear chasing him. Ducking, weaving, screaming and jumping, he again tries desperately to keep free of his attacker. Then he sees a house, runs for it, gets inside and slams the door just in time to keep the bear out. Again he thinks he has miraculously escaped and, exhausted but thankful, leans with relief against the wall of the house. Then a snake bites him! As Amos's illustration captured the attention of his audience so it will capture the attention of ours. It drives home the point: there will be no escape!

### **Other examples**

Another use of vivid language is found towards the end of the book of Job, where God rebukes Job by challenging him to govern the moral order of the universe. Far from governing the moral order, Job cannot even govern the natural and physical order. God emphasizes this by reminding Job that even the

animal kingdom is outside his control. Consider, for example, the crocodile. If Job is so clever, perhaps he could catch one with a hook, as he would catch a fish. Then maybe he could tame it and make it his pet. Perhaps he could teach it to talk or do tricks for him. Maybe his girls could put it on a leash and take it for a walk down the street as they would a pet dog (Job 41:1-5). And so the account goes on. There is an intentional humour in the pictures, and our exposition should reflect this.

There is a similar touch of humour in some of the words of Jesus. Imagine a person who strains a fly out of his drink but swallows a camel (Matt 23:24). You can see the head going down the person's throat, but the camel's hump is quite a problem – to say nothing of all the legs!

Then there is the picture of people who tithe herbs such as mint, dill and cummin, but neglect more important matters. Not everyone will be familiar with the herbs mentioned, but perhaps we could imagine people sitting with a kilo of rice in front of them. They count every grain, pushing every tenth grain aside to make sure they tithe exactly the right amount, no more and no less (Matt 23:23). In each of these cases we are to take the message seriously, but we can smile as we see touches of humour within the speaker's words.

### **Using words with care**

Examples such as the above are found throughout the Bible, but often we are so keen for spiritual lessons that we miss the plain meaning of what is written. We have to relax more, and imagine the situations as the Bible presents them. We then build word pictures so that our hearers feel as if they are there.

If we are explaining Malachi's complaints about the people's sacrifices (Mal 1:8), we should paint a picture that enables our hearers to see in their minds what Malachi is talking about. We help them see a person bringing an animal that has a broken leg, half its tail gone, open sores on its body and one ear missing. 'Oh, well,' thinks the person, 'it was going to die anyway, so I might as well offer it on the altar and get rid of it. At least it will have the honour of dying as a sacrifice.'

Malachi's response is to rebuke them for insulting God by presenting him with such a gift. They should try doing the same to the Persian governor: 'Here, your Excellency, is one smelly, disease-ridden animal that I don't have much use for, but I'm sure you'll appreciate it. Happy birthday.' What would the governor think of them? Yet God's people expect him to be favourable to them, even though they do to him what they would never do to anyone else.

What we are doing here is allowing the text to be our message. We do not have to think of lots of illustrations and challenges; we merely explain the text and show its significance. In doing this we must be careful not to over-emphasize our point. If we keep telling people how much we want to impress them with the importance, greatness, wonder or uniqueness of something, we may find they react against us. Instead of being impressed, they 'turn off'. We should rather present our statements and applications with a clarity and simplicity that people will respond to naturally.

At the same time we must aim for the right sort of response. We do not want people to respond approvingly to our sermons because they find them entertaining. This was the problem that Ezekiel had with many who listened to him. They enjoyed his sermons, but they did not do the things he said (Ezek 33:30-32). We should want to keep our hearers interested in what we are saying, but we should also want them to be taught, rebuked, corrected, encouraged, or in some other way spiritually moved (2 Tim 3:16).

## Controlling the content

### **Flexibility in Bible readings**

Whether we are expounding a book of the Bible or preaching on a topic, we should always look for variety in our presentation. When expounding a chapter of a biblical book, we do not need to begin by reading the whole chapter through. When preaching on a topic, we do not need to begin with a selected reading. Nevertheless, we should look for ways to involve our hearers in examining the Bible for themselves as we speak.

If people are used to sitting and listening without following the Bible as we speak, we shall have to try to change their habits. We should be open and honest in explaining what we want them to do. The Bible, not the sermon, is the Word of God, and our aim should be to increase their understanding of the Bible. We are not there simply to keep them occupied with listening to us speak. We should also encourage them to bring their own Bibles to church, so that through repeated use they become increasingly familiar with the Bible's contents.

Many books have been written about preaching, but the particular concern of the present book is the exposition of the biblical writings in the form God gave them. Topical sermons are valuable, but they are not the concern of this book. However, since we have mentioned Bible readings, we might consider one matter concerning such readings in topical sermons.

Although we should want our hearers to see for themselves what the various parts of the Bible say on a particular topic, we must be careful not to tire them with too many references. We do not need to turn to every relevant verse and read it. We might do this with key verses, but with others we might quote from memory or have them written out and included with our preaching notes. By asking our hearers to turn with us to selected readings at two or three key points in the sermon, we shall keep

them involved, but if we ask them to move backwards and forwards through the Bible repeatedly, they might find it annoying and consequently lose interest. Too much searching for Bible verses can also break the flow of the sermon.

Whatever our particular style, whether in preaching on a topic or in expounding a book, we must constantly look for ways to vary our presentation. The changes need not be dramatic, but they will prevent us from being predictable and will help maintain a feeling of expectancy in the audience.

### **Not too much, not too little**

A problem we all have in relation to preaching is knowing how much material to put into the sermon and how much to leave out. We can go through a book in three talks or thirty talks, depending on the purpose of the teaching, the abilities of the preacher, the needs of the congregation, the time available, and a variety of other factors. A danger is that we feel we must pass on to our hearers all that we ourselves have learnt.

In particular, this is a danger for young preachers who have just finished their formal biblical and theological training. They are enthusiastic about what they have learnt and want to pass it on. But most in the church do not share their enthusiasm. Many students of the Bible, whether recent Bible College graduates or well established teachers, find technical details of great interest, but most other people find them boring and irrelevant. People in general are not interested in whether Matthew wrote his Gospel first in Hebrew or Greek, and they soon get confused when preachers try to explain the alternative pointings of the Hebrew text or the aorist tenses of Greek verbs.

There is a place for teaching on these matters, but it is not in the normal public meetings of the church. Our chief concern in this book is with expounding the Bible in the church's regular public meetings, so that Christians are spiritually built up and the church as a whole is strengthened. Certainly, we want to increase people's knowledge of the Bible, but family church services do not provide the time or setting for detailed technical studies. Unfortunately, people sometimes see this as a reason to have no

biblical exposition at all. Our view should rather be the opposite. The church needs more biblical exposition, not less, but the exposition must be of the right sort.

According to Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4:11-13, the gifts of pastor and teacher are inseparably connected. The teacher is a pastor and the pastor is a teacher, and we must combine these two roles in our preaching. We must teach the Bible in a way that ministers to the pastoral needs of the people, so that they grow in faith, knowledge and maturity. We explain what the Bible says and show people what it might mean for them.

Our aim when preaching in church should not be to teach people all there is to know about a particular passage or book. It should be to teach in such a way that, firstly, they get immediate benefit from what they hear and, secondly, they are better equipped to study further for themselves.

### Careful planning

There is no magic formula that enables us to be an instant success in expounding the Bible in church. Probably the most essential requirement is familiarity with the text. We must be saturated with a knowledge of the biblical book we are dealing with. We must then be ruthless with ourselves as we exclude from the sermon much that we have learnt, and concentrate on developing the comparatively small amount that we can use in the preaching time available. Our aim should then be to use this material to open up the biblical book for our hearers so that the Bible itself becomes the message.

Let us suppose we are to expound a certain biblical book in six half-hour talks. Our initial study may take several weeks or months, and we should assemble our material as discussed in Chapter 5. In doing this we shall become familiar with the book's contents and aware of the main ideas that we want to develop. These will include our interpretation of the book's message and the applications we want to make when preaching. This is the point where we often meet our major problem. How are we to fit our selected material into the time available, without on the one hand boring people with too much detail, or

on the other hand merely giving a survey that hardly touches the text?

If our allotment is six talks, our first job is to divide the book into six portions that can each be a self-contained unit. Although the talks may be consecutive, we should remember that the audience changes from week to week, and each sermon must be understandable to those who missed earlier sermons.

Our next job is to look at the portion we have decided upon for each talk, and select those sections or verses that best express its message. These are the verses that we shall comment on and ask our hearers to read, because they represent the content of the biblical message that we want to explain and apply.

In selecting these verses, we must be flexible. In the case of a New Testament book, particularly a shorter book, we may be able to comment on every verse. In the case of an Old Testament book, particularly a longer book, we may be able to comment on comparatively few verses. We must then decide which verses to read and which to pass over. In working out how many verses to read, a general guide is to select the same number of verses as there are minutes for preaching. On this basis we can plan to use thirty verses for a thirty-minute sermon. Some of these will be in groups of consecutive verses, others will be isolated, but in all cases they should fit into the natural development of the book.

Most modern Bibles have sub-headings that indicate the natural sections within a book or chapter, and these sub-headings can help us in planning how to cover the biblical material. Wherever possible we should deal with a group of verses rather than divide a chapter into verse-by-verse pieces. We should aim to move along with the biblical writer's account, and not digress into other matters. Our purpose is not to use the biblical text to provide us with topics for mini-sermons, but to open up the text so that *it* becomes the sermon.

In short, what we want to do is introduce our hearers to the text, so that they understand its meaning and significance. We prepare the way for the biblical text to speak to them.

### Working examples

The Bible contains a variety of literature, and we must handle various books in different ways. It is not possible here to give an example of exposition for each kind of book in the Bible. We shall therefore limit ourselves to four examples, which we shall deal with in the next four chapters. In each case we shall assume that the sermon is of half-hour length, which means that we should restrict our reading and explaining to about thirty verses.

In Chapter 8 we shall look at an Old Testament historical book, in this case the book of Judges. The aim will be to show how, by carefully selecting and using certain verses or groups of verses, we can teach the contents of several chapters. We do not just tell our hearers a story, but help them understand the biblical record and be spiritually challenged by it. We should be able to handle the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) in a similar fashion – not just the narrative sections but also the lengthy collections of laws and regulations.

Next we shall look at an Old Testament prophet. Because the writings of the prophets are sermons rather than narratives and are in poetry rather than prose, they are not as easy to understand as the historical books. Most people are not familiar with their contents, and therefore we must explain the text in more detail. With the Minor Prophets we should have no difficulty finding the time to do this in our church program, because they are mostly short books. But we rarely get the opportunity to expound the longer books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Therefore, our working example in Chapter 9 will be one of the longer prophetic books, Isaiah. If we can work out how to teach the longer books, we shall have little trouble with the shorter books. We could handle some of the Psalms and Wisdom writings in much the same way.

The next two chapters will concern the New Testament. Here, in comparison with the Old Testament, we can assume that our hearers are more familiar with the biblical text; but we ought not assume that they understand what the text means. Also, the

New Testament writings are much more tightly packed; that is, they do not have lengthy narratives, arguments, descriptions and discourses such as we find in the Old Testament. We cannot easily pass over large parts of the material with a brief survey, because most verses fit tightly into the development of the writer's thought. In general we shall have to deal with every verse, but we do not want to burden the audience with week after week of detailed verse-by-verse studies.

Our guidelines for teaching the New Testament will be based on two books that differ considerably in content, purpose, style and length. In Chapter 10 we shall look at John's Gospel as a working example for a longer New Testament book, and in Chapter 11 at 1 Thessalonians as a working example for a shorter book. In both cases we shall attempt to expound the New Testament in a way that explains its original meaning and at the same time benefits today's Christians.

## Expounding the Old Testament (i)

### Parts of a book

Our working example for dealing with an Old Testament historical book is Judges. We should not expect to preach through the book at the rate of one chapter a week for twenty-one weeks; nor is such an arrangement desirable. If, on the other hand, we tried to cover the whole book in only two or three talks, we would do little more than survey the book. What we have to do, therefore, is accept whatever number of talks the church program allots us, and deal with the book within that framework. If we are allotted only two or three talks, we should not try to cover too much, but perhaps give an overview of the book and then concentrate on two chosen portions or themes.

For the purpose of this example, we shall suppose we are allowed six half-hour sermons on the book. This should be enough to cover most of it satisfactorily. So we divide the book into six parts, using natural divisions within the book wherever possible. The six parts could be Chapters 1-3 (Introduction and some early judges), Chapters 4-5 (Deborah), Chapters 6-9 (Gideon and Abimelech), Chapters 10-12 (Jephthah), Chapters 13-16 (Samson) and Chapters 17-21 (Tribal affairs).

This division does not mean we must deal with every story in every chapter, but sets us boundaries within which we must work for each talk. We may, for example, consider that with the first talk there is not enough time to deal with all the material in Chapters 1-3, and therefore we decide to omit the material concerning the judges Othniel and Ehud. This is not because we think the two men unimportant, but because within the limited time available we prefer to concentrate on other information and ideas found in those three chapters.

In our present working example we shall deal with only one of the above six parts, Chapters 6-9. This section consists of the

story of Gideon in Chapters 6-8 and the story of his son Abimelech in Chapter 9. But because many places, people and events are mentioned in these four chapters, we expect that the audience will become confused if we try to deal with them all within half an hour. We therefore decide to omit the story of Abimelech entirely, and concentrate on Gideon.

[With this and the other working examples that follow, it is essential that readers have their Bibles open at the appropriate place, so that they can follow the explanatory comments and see how the biblical material is used.]

### Introducing Gideon

The earlier talks on the book of Judges will have outlined the recurring pattern of Israel's history during the period under consideration. We could mention it briefly again, namely, that the people of Israel turned away from God, copied Canaanite religious practices and fell under the control of neighbouring peoples. When, after years of oppression, they cried for mercy, God in his grace sent them deliverers who drove out the enemy and restored independence. These deliverers were called judges because they carried out God's judgment, whether in defeating foreign enemies or in administering justice locally.

Because the stories recorded in Judges are usually concerned with specific tribal areas within Israel, a simple (and preferably colourful) map will help the audience as we trace developments in the biblical account.

To begin our account we read the first four verses of Chapter 6. However, we do not have to read the verses straight through without a stop, nor do we have to read every word of each verse. What is important is that we encourage our hearers to follow in their own Bibles as we read and comment. We note as we read verse 1 that the oppressors in the story are the Midianites, and their oppression lasted seven years. We can add a brief explanation that the Midianites came from the regions south of Israel, and they attacked by moving north around the Dead Sea and entering Israel from the east. Our map can help people see the route.

We read on in verses 2 and 3, where we see how the Midianites oppressed Israel. They did not occupy the land permanently, but made annual raids on Israel's farms. We read in verse 4 that these raids extended across southern Israel to Gaza on the Mediterranean coastal plain, and we shall find later that they extended north as far as Naphtali. There is no need to look up the verses concerning Naphtali, as we shall meet them in due course. We should indicate these places on our map, pointing out also that to carry out these raids, the Midianites had to cross the Jordan River. This is a piece of information that will be useful later.

So far we have read only four verses, but we might draw people's attention to the mention of camels in verse 5. We do not need to read the verse for them, but we have got them to look at the Bible once again, where they can see at a glance the word 'camels'. It is a small detail that helps keep the narrative tied to the world as we know it.

The person God will use to drive out the enemy is Gideon. We introduce him to our hearers by telling them that he was from the Israelite tribe of Manasseh, and that the clan he belonged to within that tribe was Abiezer. People of this clan lived in a village in Manasseh's territory in the north of Israel, and were among the victims of the Midianite raids. We see all this in verse 11. (The word 'Manasseh' will not occur till verse 15, but that need not bother us at this point. People will see the word when we come to verse 15 shortly.)

Notice here how we can have variety in our explanation of the biblical material. In this case we have explained the verse before reading it. We simply give them the information, and then say, 'You'll see this if you look at verse 11.' Most people will unconsciously respond by doing what we have just suggested; they will look at verse 11. We have also let them know, without saying so specifically, that we do not need some higher learning to get this information. It is all there in the Bible. We merely draw their attention to it, so they can see it for themselves. In getting them to look at the Bible in this way, we have achieved something important.

When Gideon learnt that God was going to use him to overthrow the Midianites, he felt fearful and uncertain, but he was reassured with the promise of God's presence and power. We read verses 14-16, and take the opportunity to make an application that will benefit our hearers. Many of us are fearful and uncertain as was Gideon, but we need to be reminded that our effectiveness for God depends on his work in and through us, not on our personality or ability. We may expand this point a little, but need not say a lot. The important thing is to draw a specific practical application out of the words of the text before us. We conclude the section by mentioning God's reassurance through the miraculous sign of verse 21.

### **Gideon makes a start**

Having been reassured by God, Gideon immediately got to work. So should God's people today. Sometimes we need to be reminded of Mary's words to the servants in Cana: 'Whatever he tells you to do, do it' (John 2:5). And when Gideon got to work, he started at the most logical but perhaps the most difficult place of all, his own home.

Since Israel's troubles were a consequence of the people's idolatry, Gideon's first public act was to show people that they must renounce their false religion and return to God. This was difficult for him to do, because his father was caretaker of the local Baal shrine. But Gideon was determined to do whatever God told him. We then read verses 25-27, which record how he destroyed the Baal altar and its accompanying symbols, after which he built an altar to God and offered a sacrifice on it. Gideon was so afraid of opposition that he carried out his work at night, but we need not criticize him for that. At least he did what God told him to do, and so should we. Whether we feel frightened or heroic is not important; what is important is our obedience.

We then draw our hearers' attention to the opening words of verse 28, and go on to outline how the people of the town wanted to kill Gideon. When God's people stand for him against popular opinion, they can expect opposition, but sometimes we get

support from unexpected quarters. Gideon's father, whose shrine had just been destroyed, became the first convert, and stood with Gideon against the townspeople (read verse 31). Even better was to follow, because when Gideon called Israel's men to form an army, the Abiezrites, who had just wanted to kill him, were the first to volunteer. We then read verses 33-35, pointing to the role of the Abiezrites and explaining other details as we go.

Readers often pass over unfamiliar names of people and places they meet in the Bible, but these verses give us the opportunity to show that such names are significant. As we relate the biblical details to our map, we show how the Midianites came from the east, crossed the Jordan and camped in the north of Israel in the Valley of Jezreel. We note also that the Valley of Jezreel covers the border regions of Manasseh (Gideon's tribe) and the smaller neighbouring tribes. Gideon's army consisted of men from the tribes of this region, a fact that will be significant in the battle stories that follow.

As the time of conflict with Midian approached, Gideon's faith weakened. He therefore asked God to perform miraculous signs that would reassure him. Gideon should not have asked God for signs, because God had already assured him of victory. He should simply have believed and obeyed. But God in his grace gave Gideon the signs he asked for.

Because many Christians are familiar with this incident, we probably do not need to read it. We might mention, however, that although we today should not encourage Christians to ask God for special signs, neither should we condemn those who may have received special signs. God is sovereign and does as he sees best. None of us is perfect, but God in his grace still deals lovingly with us, sometimes in the only way that we are capable of understanding.

### The battle with Midian

God allowed Gideon only three hundred soldiers to launch the attack against the Midianites, so that the Israelites might know that God, not military power, was the source of their victory. We could emphasize this by reading Chapter 7 verse 2,

and making a comment on our own tendency to take credit for ourselves instead of giving it to God. There are also New Testament references we might use such as 2 Corinthians 4:7, 12:9, and Philippians 3:7-11. There is no need for discussion about the different ways the Israelite soldiers drank when they went to the water's edge; the important point is that God wanted to reduce their number to three hundred.

We might read verses 13-14 to draw the audience's attention to the unnatural fear that came upon the Midianites. When one of their soldiers dreamt that a poor man's barley loaf rolled into a Midianite tent and overturned it, he thought this meant that the poverty-stricken Israelites would invade the Midianite camp and destroy it. The Midianites could, in fact, have wiped out the Israelites with ease, but this unnatural fear reassured Gideon of victory. We then read verse 15, which gives us encouraging words to pass on to the audience.

The story of Israel's attack on the Midianite camp is fairly well known and we need not read it. We can outline briefly the confusion that burst upon the Midianites when, in the middle of the night, they woke to the frightening sound of rams horns blasting, water jars breaking and Israelites screaming. On seeing the hundreds of lights around the camp, they thought the whole Israelite army was upon them. Some began swinging their swords at anything that moved in the darkness, but they succeeded only in killing their own men. The rest fled for their lives, running back along the Valley of Jezreel towards the Jordan River crossing.

Only three hundred Israelites had taken part in the attack on the Midianite camp, but now the larger Israelite force joined the battle. We should read verse 23, as this shows the significance of the verse we explained earlier about Gideon's preparation of the army (see 6:35). Notice again how a verse, even an apparently uninteresting one, suddenly has freshness and interest when we comment on it and then read it (rather than read it first and then make our comments). This practice, besides adding variety to the sermon, saves valuable time. Also, by reading only selected verses from each chapter, we keep the sermon moving along

briskly. At the same time our constant reference to the text keeps our hearers involved and helps maintain their interest.

### A sweeping victory

Although the main Israelite fighting force came from tribes to the north, Gideon also prepared a group from the chief tribe of central Israel, Ephraim. This group's task was to take control of the Jordan crossing and so cut off the Midianites' escape. Having given this information, we then read it in verses 24-25, again using our map to show what was happening. In reading this we note that the Ephraimites killed two princes, who were also army generals, of the fleeing Midianites.

Without stopping at the break between chapters (perhaps pointing out that there were no chapter divisions in the original writings), we read Chapter 8 verses 1-3. We see from verse 1 that the Ephraimites were offended because Gideon did not call them to the main battle. In every era and country there are complainers. They are even in the church. Self-centred people are easily offended; jealous people readily find fault with others. We could speak at length on this matter, not only because we see it in others but also because we have been guilty of it ourselves. There is, however, no reason to speak at length, for most people will readily see the lesson. Our difficulty in such cases is not in knowing what is right, but in doing it.

Unless everyone in the audience has an easy-read version such as the Good News Bible, we shall need to explain the meaning of Gideon's statement about 'the gleanings of Ephraim' being better than 'the vintage of Abiezer'. The word-picture refers to the picking of grapes, where the main harvest is called the vintage and the leftovers collected later are called the gleanings. Gideon was from the clan of Abiezer, and he and his men had destroyed many of the Midianites in the main battle (the vintage), whereas the Ephraimites had killed only a few fleeing Midianites at the Jordan crossing (the gleanings).

But Gideon, knowing that a gentle answer can soften a critic's anger (Prov 15:1), assured the Ephraimites that his 'vintage' was insignificant compared with their 'gleanings'. He

had led a great slaughter of Midianites (for the numbers see 8:10), but those he had killed were all just common soldiers. The Ephraimites, by contrast, might have killed only a few, but among them were two of Midian's top generals. 'I ask you,' says Gideon, 'what have I done in comparison with you?' The Ephraimites liked this flattery, and the Bible goes on to say, 'When they heard this they were no longer angry.' It is a sad thing to admit, but any appeal to pride is usually successful. We too easily feel good inside when someone says something that satisfies our vanity.

### The dangers of success

We might expect that the story of Midian's defeat should end at this point. If it did, Gideon would remain a man of faith (see Heb 11:32) who had few recorded faults. But the heroes of the Bible are not examples of right behaviour in everything. The remainder of the story of Gideon shows none of the dependence on God that characterized him earlier, and is a reminder to us of the danger of power and success.

Because of limited preaching time, we cannot deal with this latter section in detail. We should, however, outline the sequence of events. The Midianites who escaped across the Jordan were now almost clear of Israelite territory and probably thought the fighting was finished. But Gideon was determined to kill the two Midianite kings – solely, it seems, in revenge for their killing his brothers in battle. The leaders of Israelite towns east of Jordan refused to help Gideon, fearing the Midianites might return and attack them. Gideon pushed on without their help, captured the Midianite kings, returned to punish the uncooperative Israelite towns, and then executed the Midianite kings.

In these events Gideon himself had acted like the kings of the surrounding nations, and it is not surprising that soon the people of Israel wanted to make him their king. At this point we can read Chapter 8 verse 22, adding to it verse 23 to show that Gideon, to his credit, refused their offer.

But Gideon was not as godly a leader in peaceful times as he had been during the Midianite crisis. As Aaron once did, he

made a material symbol for the invisible God, and this soon became an object of idolatry (read verse 27). Though not officially a king, he lived the lifestyle of a king, maintaining a large household of wives, concubines and children. One of these children was even named Abimelech, meaning ‘my father is king’ (read verses 29-31).

We might prefer not to finish a sermon on a negative note, but that is the way the story of Gideon finishes. It demonstrates that power and success are not easy to handle, and can spoil a godly life. Gideon at one stage showed a dependence on God and a commitment to his purposes that freed Israel from Midianite oppression, but he could not live indefinitely on past spiritual experiences. Neither can we. Christianity is a day-by-day walk with God that requires our constant attention. We might, like Gideon and other heroes of Judges, be known as people of faith, but we must maintain that faith to the end.

### **Further suggestions**

In the working example we have just considered, the material might at first appear to be more than can fit into thirty minutes. This is because we are studying the entire text of three chapters and at the same time working out how to handle it. But if we preached all the material set out above, we could handle it comfortably in a thirty-minute sermon.

The total number of verses that we (and our hearers) read is thirty-two – Chapter 6 verses 1-4, 11, 14-16, 25-28, 31, 33-35, Chapter 7 verses 2, 13-15, 23-25, Chapter 8 verses 1-3, 22-23, 27, 29-31. To make these verses easy to see as we preach, we could rule a line beside them down the margin of the Bible. All verse numbers in our pulpit notes should correspond to these markings, so that we find verses easily as our eyes move from our notes to the Bible. We should also time ourselves beforehand and write the number of minutes at selected points down the side of our notes to show us when to begin each section. We must discipline ourselves to finish within the time allotted.

The sample pulpit notes on page 84 summarize the sermon content discussed on pages 75-82. Once we are familiar with the

relevant chapters of Judges and the applications we want to make from them, these notes will jog the memory as we preach.

Although the sample pulpit notes illustrate certain features, they are not intended to be a model. They merely show how several pages of sermon contents can be reduced to one page of notes to jog the memory. The five major headings, for example, are not designed to be announced to the audience. They are to help us see at a glance where we are as we progress through the sermon. If we want headings to announce, we should think of more interesting ones than those in the notes. Much depends on whether we prefer to move through the text in a running commentary or deal with the text in sections according to the sermon points we want to emphasize.

Just as we differ in preaching style from each other, so we should look for ways of varying our own style. The chief concern of this working example is not to recommend a particular style, but to show how we can use the biblical text as the substance of our sermon without reading and expounding every verse.

<b>Gideon - Judges Chapter 6-8</b>		
<b>Introducing Gideon (6:1-24)</b>		0
Recurring pattern - meaning of 'judges'		
1-4     Midian - route - annual raids - Gaza, Naphtali		
11     G. from Manasseh, Abiezer - fearful and uncertain		
14-16   God reassures G. - apply 14, 16 (note also 21)		
<b>Gideon makes a start (6:25-40)</b>	6	
25-27   Immediate start (cf. Jn 2:5) - most difficult at home		
First step: destroy false altar - note Baal features		
Next: build true altar - afraid, but obedient - cf. us		
28     Abiezrites angry - 'popular opinion', 'peer pressure'		
31     Support from unexpected - father first convert		
33-35   Abiezrites join G. - East, Jordan, Jezreel, Nth tribes		
G. faith weakens - signs - God gracious - cf. us		
<b>Battle with Midian (7:1-23)</b>	15	
2     Only 300 for initial attack - note re soldiers drink		
God's power, not ours - 2 Cor 4:7, 12:9, Phil 3:7-11		
13-14   Unnatural fear in M. camp - explain dream		
15     G. reassured - worships - then acts		
Outline attack - M. panic - flee towards Jordan		
23     Larger Israelite force now joins (cf. 6:35)		
<b>A sweeping victory (7:24-8:3)</b>	20	
24-25   Ephraim - Jordan crossing - killed two M. princes		
8:1-3   Ephr offended - self-centred, jealous - us too?		
'Gleanings' - 'Vintage' (8:10) - cf. Prov 15:1		
Flattery - appeal to self-interest, pride, vanity		
<b>Dangers of success (8:4-35)</b>	25	
Faith (Heb 11:32) - but not always - cf. us		
Outline G. pursue M. kings - revenge - Isr towns		
22-23   G. acted like king - people want him - he refuses		
27     Made symbol of unseen God - idolatry		
29-31   Lifestyle of king - concubines, children - 'Abi-melech'		
Finish negative note? Danger of success, power		
Can't live on past experiences - firm to end	30	

## Exounding the Old Testament (ii)

### **The preachers of Bible times**

When we expound the Old Testament prophets, we are largely dealing with sermons that those ancient preachers spoke or wrote. This is more difficult than expounding a book that is mainly narrative. Because the prophet is not usually narrating a story, we cannot deal with his book by commenting on isolated verses and filling in the gaps with our own summary of events. In expounding the prophet's sermons, we shall have to explain most of the material. In general our hearers will not be familiar with the prophets, and we cannot assume they will understand the parts we skip over. Therefore, we shall have to deal with most of the verses.

In the case of the Minor Prophets (or books of comparable length such as Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs), we should be able to cover the entire text. These books average only about six chapters, and we can deal with them as we might deal with the New Testament letters – perhaps not in as much detail, but at least we can comment on most of the verses. The books that are difficult to expound in church are the longer ones, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Our working example will be Isaiah, though some of the suggestions will apply also to the Minor Prophets. If we know how to expound a long book, we should have no trouble expounding a shorter book.

### **Our own understanding**

We all know that we must study a book for ourselves before we can teach it in church, but in the case of Isaiah we shall probably have to spend several months of study before we can even plan how to teach it. With a small book such as Zephaniah, we might have little difficulty preparing two or three talks; for no matter how familiar with it we may or may not be, if we start preparation weeks in advance, we should be able to teach the

book confidently. With Isaiah, however, we cannot confidently teach any part of the book unless we know what the whole book is about. Before we can work out how to handle it, we must know its contents and natural divisions, so that we can make its message plain and relevant to the congregation.

For the present exercise, we shall assume that we have done the hard work of studying the book. We are familiar with its contents, and now we must plan and begin the teaching.

The church's teaching program will determine the number of talks available to us. If we preached on the book each Sunday for six months, we could expound it in some detail, but the congregation might have difficulty maintaining interest. Even if we preached on the book consecutively for three months, we could test the congregation's patience. An alternative would be to divide the book into two sections at its natural dividing point, and then spend a number of weeks on each section, with a break to separate the sections and provide variety.

In the working example that follows, we shall suppose we have twelve talks allocated to the book. We shall use seven of these to cover Chapters 1-39, and five to cover Chapters 40-66. Again the talks will be planned for thirty minutes.

### **How to handle the book**

Whenever we study a biblical book, our aim should be to understand the writer's purpose and see how he develops it as he moves through the book. When we expound the book, we should, as much as possible, deal with it according to the form the writer gave it. However, because of the limitations of the church program within which we work, we have to find ways of fitting the material into the number of talks available.

This means, in the case of Isaiah, that we have to select and use only some of the material, yet at the same time remain true to the author's purpose and meaning. One way to do this is to plan the sequence of our sermons according to the sequence of reigns or eras that the book deals with. Because the chapters of Isaiah are not in chronological order, people find the book difficult to

read. But by dealing with it according to the chronology of events, we can help people understand it; though where chapters form a unit, we should keep them together and not break up the book unnecessarily. The outline that follows shows the groups of chapters that can be covered in our twelve sermons.

### **Seven talks on Isaiah 1-39**

Normally, we should begin with an outline of the book's historical background. We should guide our hearers to selected verses in Isaiah and Kings, so that they can see the connection between the books. Only when we have made the hearers aware of the circumstances surrounding the book should we proceed to expound Chapter 1. We may, however, make an exception with Isaiah, because of the way we intend to deal with the book. Although Isaiah tells us the kings in whose reigns he ministered, we would confuse our hearers if we gave details of all the reigns at once. We shall be dealing with the various eras as we move through the book, so we can give the appropriate background at the introduction to each section.

Of the kings mentioned in the opening verse, Uzziah and Jotham are mentioned again only incidentally. Isaiah is not concerned with specific events in their reigns, though in Chapters 1-6 he gives us a view of Judah's condition during their reigns. These six chapters set the scene for the book and provide us with the content of our first sermon.

Ahaz and Hezekiah are the two kings that Isaiah is mainly concerned with. Chapters 7-12 deal with the reign of Ahaz, and should be introduced with a carefully explained background. Details will come from the chapters themselves as well as from Kings. We should allow two talks to deal with these chapters.

Hezekiah's reign is the chief concern of Chapters 28-39, and we should allow two more talks to deal with this section. (Within this section are two chapters about wider issues of judgment and salvation, but we shall not have time to deal with them.) The setting for these chapters is again found in Kings, though it can also be found in an historical appendix within the chapters themselves.

This leaves Chapters 13-27. Apart from four chapters at the end, this section is a collection of messages for various nations. (The four chapters at the end are again about wider issues of judgment and salvation, but we shall not have time to deal with them.) We can allow two talks to deal with this section. To make things easier, we could group Isaiah's messages according to their chronological order rather than the order of the chapters. First we deal with nations of the time of Ahaz, then with those of the time of Hezekiah, and finally with those of the Babylonian era. This final group brings the events of Chapters 1-39 to their climax, and prepares the way for Chapters 40-66.

### **Five talks on Isaiah 40-66**

There is a gap of about 150 years between Chapters 39 and 40. The scene changes from Jerusalem in the time of Isaiah to Babylon in the time of Judah's captivity. God is now preparing the way for the overthrow of Babylon, the release of the Jews and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Chapters 40-48 deal with these matters in a variety of ways and provide the substance for the first sermon in this group of five.

Within this opening section we shall meet the first of four songs concerning the Servant of the Lord, but we shall not have time to speak about the Servant at length. We could, however, make further comments on this song when we deal with the next section, Chapters 49-55. This section includes the three other Servant Songs, and could be dealt with in two sermons. Of the two remaining sermons, one would look at life in the rebuilt nation (Chapters 56-60), and the other would look at the glorious future that God has prepared for those who are truly his people (Chapters 61-66).

### **Planning the opening sermon**

Our working example will now confine itself to the first of these twelve sermons. As we look at Isaiah Chapters 1-6, we wonder how we can cover six chapters (128 verses) in only thirty minutes. Clearly, we cannot read and explain each verse. Neither can we merely survey the material by reading isolated verses and filling in the gaps with our own summaries. We are dealing with

the sermons of a prophet, not the stories of a narrator, and the writing is in poetry, not prose. The text needs to be explained if it is to speak to the audience. We therefore accept that we cannot deal with all the sections, but must choose those that represent the prophet's message, even if not all of it.

In the case of Isaiah 1-6 we shall concentrate on those parts that display conditions in Judah and show why God called Isaiah to be his messenger. This will give us the setting for the book and at the same time give us instructive teaching for today.

Since we have to omit parts of these chapters entirely, we decide to omit those that deal with the future glory of Jerusalem. This is a prominent theme in later chapters, so we can discuss it when we reach that part of the book. With such a careful choice of material, we can have a different emphasis in each sermon, yet still cover the entire book. Even if people do not hear every sermon, they should understand each one they do hear, because each will be understandable within itself. Those who hear the whole series should understand the whole book.

From the opening six chapters we select four sections to deal with, and in each section we shall ask the congregation to read along with us. We shall not deal with the four sections in the same way, because we want variety. Many people are prejudiced against expository preaching, particularly when they know the preacher is about to begin a long series or a long book. We must make certain not to bore them in our first sermon. This is an added reason for covering six chapters in our opening talk. If we spend too much time on the introduction or the opening verses, people will lose interest. We want to take our hearers well into the book as quickly as possible, so that they can feel its spirit and be enthused to hear more.

### **God's accusations**

Prophets came from a variety of backgrounds. Some were from the country, others from the city; some were farmers, others courtiers. Isaiah was a resident of Jerusalem who became a prominent statesman and an adviser to several kings. We can refer our audience to the kings named in the opening verse, but

shall not stop to talk about them. We simply mention that Ahaz's significance will be explained in the next talk, and Hezekiah's in the one after that. We might also mention that the Israelite nation was at this time divided into two kingdoms, Israel to the north and Judah to the south, but this will be discussed further in the next talk. For the present, we note that Isaiah is concerned with Judah and its capital, Jerusalem.

If our hearers have had any contact with Isaiah, they will at least have read the opening chapter. For some it may be new, but for many the first half of the chapter is well known. It needs little explanation, and we could introduce our hearers to the spirit of the book by reading (selectively) the first twenty verses in a free and robust style – much as an Old Testament prophet might have spoken. We choose certain verses beforehand, introduce them with a comment and then read them with feeling.

The opening scene is one of judgment, where God accuses Judah of being rebellious and ungrateful. Animals show more gratitude to their masters than the Judeans do to God (read verses 2-3). They are a nation of sinners, and they despise him (read verse 4). God has punished them till they are beaten and bruised, but they take no notice (read verses 5-6). He has sent enemy attacks to devastate their country, but they do not change (read verse 7).

We skip over some verses to come to another of God's accusations. The people think he is impressed with their ritual sacrifices and festivals, but because their lives are full of sin, such exercises are hateful to him (read verses 10-15). What God wants from them is not increased religious activity, but changed behaviour. They must turn from their sin and begin to practise compassion and justice in their everyday dealings (read verses 16-17). It is not too late to receive mercy. God is ready to forgive them, if they are willing to repent (read verse 18). He therefore presents the alternatives to them (read verses 19-20).

This short section should take no more than five minutes to read. With the right tone and emphasis, we can help our hearers see not only what God was saying to the people of Judah, but

also what he might be saying to us. In view of further readings to come, there is no need for lengthy comment at this stage. We can leave the words of God to make their own impact.

### Where does sin lead?

In Chapter 3 Isaiah paints a vivid picture of Jerusalem's coming destruction. In so doing, he shows the Judeans (and us) where a society will end when it is characterized by greed, oppression and self-interest.

We can handle this section much as we handled Chapter 1, though we shall have to skip over verses that will take too long to explain. Unlike the opening chapter, this chapter contains little that speaks specifically about spiritual matters. The main application comes from the chapter's overall message, though we shall briefly note specific social evils as we move through. The chapter is descriptive and colourful, and we should be able to imagine the pictures that Isaiah paints for us. We can probably think also of present-day equivalents, which will help our hearers see the sorts of things Isaiah talks about.

In Isaiah's picture the government collapses and there is a shortage of necessities such as food and water (read verse 1). No leaders, good or bad, can be found to lead the country (read verses 2-3), lawlessness results, and power falls into the hands of immature youths (read verses 4-5). Verses 6-7 present a vivid picture of the desperate attempt to persuade someone to restore order in the chaotic city, but we may not have time to explain the verses.

However, we could draw attention to the reason for the city's collapse, namely, the people's defiance of God (read verse 8). We could also draw attention to the first part of verse 9, where the people boast of their moral freedom and are proud of their disgusting behaviour. We need add little to these verses; our hearers will readily see parallels to modern society.

A significant point is found in the second part of verse 12, where God blames the leaders for the nation's downfall. We could remind our hearers that while leadership brings power

and status, it also brings responsibility. This applies not just in politics but also in the church. The words of verse 12 are a warning to all who are in positions of leadership.

God is particularly angry with those who oppress defenceless citizens and use their positions of power to enrich themselves. The prophet speaks specifically of the nation's political leaders (read verses 14-15). He also talks about their wives, who dress lavishly and behave haughtily, but who now are to suffer terrible humiliation (read verses 16-17). Verses 18-25 add to the colour of the section, as the prophet describes how the extravagance and vanity of the rich will be replaced by poverty and shame.

With imagination and practice we can inject liveliness into our running commentary on Chapter 3. Although our overall purpose is to show (as Isaiah does) that judgment will fall upon a society characterized by selfishness and injustice, we can draw attention to other points of present-day relevance as we pass through (such as verses 8b, 9a, 12 and 15).

### Specific sins

Our presentation of Isaiah's graphic pictures from Chapters 1 and 3 should have taken us no longer than fifteen minutes. Already the audience should have caught the book's flavour and been challenged by its message. We now move to Chapter 5, where we shall point out five sins that have led to Jerusalem's corruption and coming judgment.

Some of these sins will be mentioned again later in the book, but our future sermons will not deal with them. This shows once more how we select and use the biblical material. We fit it to the preaching requirements, but at the same time we remain true to the biblical writer's message. As we saw earlier, our present sermon skips over references to Israel's future glory, because that will be the subject of a later sermon. In like manner our later sermons will skip over references to these social evils, because they are the subject of the present sermon.

Previously, we commented on the verses and then read them. In this chapter we can read the verses and then comment on

them. The verses dealing with the five sins all begin in the same way – ‘Woe to those who . . .’ or ‘You are doomed!’

To introduce the first sin, we read verses 8 and 9. Rich landowners lend money to the poor at high rates of interest, and then seize their lands when they cannot repay their debts. But God will make sure the oppressors lose the property they have unjustly gained. We should have no difficulty making a modern application of the principle found in these verses.

We skip over to verses 11 and 12, where Isaiah condemns those who live only for pleasure. He criticizes their lifestyle not just because it is extravagant, but chiefly because it leads them to ignore God. The present-day application is again obvious.

Next we go to verses 18 and 19, where Isaiah pictures people so overloaded with sin they are pulling it along by the cartload (or truckload, as we might say today). They are proud of the amount of sin they commit, and challenge God to stop them.

Our fourth example comes from verses 20 and 21, which need little explanation. People reverse God’s moral standards, claiming they know everything and have no need for God.

To conclude this section we read verses 22 and 23, where Isaiah makes amusing comments on the social life of the rich and powerful. They are ‘heroes of the wine bottle’ and ‘champions at mixing drinks’, but in the administration of justice they are weak and cowardly.

### The task ahead

In the cases of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the account of God’s call begins with the opening chapter. In the case of Isaiah, we do not read of his call till Chapter 6. Perhaps the reason for this delay is that we might see from the first five chapters how bad Judah is and how difficult Isaiah’s task is going to be.

Whether or not Chapter 6 is well known to the audience, we need not read every word. For variety we can use another technique in explaining the text, and that is to read the verses we want to emphasize and give our own paraphrase of the verses in

between. We could paraphrase Isaiah's description of the exaltation of the holy God in glory (verses 1-4), leading us to read verse 5. Isaiah confesses he is unclean, because the people he lives among are unclean (as we have seen in the previous five chapters). This is not to suggest that Isaiah is as bad as the rest of the Judeans, but we are all adversely affected by the society in which we live, whether we like it or not. The more we are aware of God's holiness, the more we shall be aware of our own sin; but, as with Isaiah, we can be cleansed through God's gracious provision (read verse 7). We are also reminded of the necessity for cleansing before we can do God's work.

We can then read verse 8, where God asks who will take his message to this unattractive lot of people we have been looking at for the last five chapters. Isaiah volunteers, and God responds in verses 9-10 in words that we can paraphrase as meaning, 'The more you preach to them, the more they will refuse to listen to you. They will, in fact, become so hardened that they will find it difficult ever to repent and be forgiven.'

This is not encouraging news for Isaiah, and he asks God in verse 11 how long this will go on for – three months? . . . a year? . . . five years? God replies that it will go on, and on, and on, till the nation collapses, Jerusalem is destroyed and the people are taken into captivity in a foreign land (verses 11-12).

But that is not the end of the story. God's saving mercy is still active, and he will bring his purposes to fulfilment. He promises to preserve the few who remain faithful to him, and out of these he will build a new people for himself.

God gives this assurance to Isaiah by means of an illustration in the closing verse. The apparently dead nation is likened to a giant tree that has been chopped down and burnt, so that only its stump remains. But the stump is not dead. From it comes a small green shoot that grows up to become a tree again. Isaiah's work will not be fruitless. Some will respond to his preaching, and these will be God's true people. They may be only a minority within the nation, but God will preserve them and their believing descendants, so that from them a new people will grow up.

Jerusalem will be destroyed and the nation will appear to be dead and finished, but God will still be at work.

Just as Isaiah did not live to see the outcome of his work several generations later, so we do not always see the results of our work. Although we should not use this as an excuse for unfruitfulness, we can learn from the commitment that Isaiah demonstrated. And we can be assured that the God who called and motivated him is still at work today.

### **Further suggestions**

As we examine the working example on Isaiah 1-6, it is clear that our reading involves more than the thirty verses suggested for a half-hour sermon. But in the first three chapters we do little more than introduce and read the verses, allowing them to make their own impact. Also, we need not read every part of every verse. In some cases we may read only the first half, in others only the second half. The verses on which we make more comment are those of Chapters 5 and 6, but here the total number is only fifteen, which is a suitable number to expound in the second half of the sermon.

If we prefer, we can mark our Bibles instead of preparing separate preaching notes for the pulpit. We can draw lines down the margins to bracket the verses to read, and with a fine pen write brief notes to remind us of our proposed explanations and comments. The four major sections we have chosen could each be headed with a number and title to draw our attention to the portion that we must move to next. As we develop our own style of preaching, we may create a system of markings, symbols and colours that enables us to move between the biblical text and our notes with freedom and confidence.

## Exounding the New Testament (i)

### **Much material, but little time**

Techniques for expounding the New Testament are in some ways similar to those for expounding the Old, but we are less able to cover long sections in a short time. The New Testament is a different sort of book from the Old. It does not, for instance, contain large areas of narrative spanning hundreds of years of a nation's history. Nor does it contain lengthy books of psalms, wisdom sayings and prophetic sermons, where recurring topics enable us to expound a book without expounding every chapter. Much of the New Testament consists of direct teaching, often in the form of letters that cannot easily be abbreviated. Even in books that contain narratives, there is more teaching and less story than in the Old Testament narrative books.

As with the Old Testament, a major problem in expounding the New concerns the longer books. We are unlikely to average more than one chapter per sermon (many of us would prefer to average less), which means that we shall probably take several months to cover a book of more than ten chapters. Because of this, we often avoid consecutive teaching on longer books or deal with only selected parts of them. The result is that, although we may preach through the shorter New Testament letters, we rarely preach through the longer letters or the Gospels.

We therefore turn now to consider how we might handle a longer New Testament book. Our working example will be the Gospel of John.

When we preach through Matthew, Mark or Luke, our task is made a little easier because of the many sections that contain narratives or have parallels in the other Gospels. But when we preach through John, we do not have these advantages. There are fewer narratives and fewer parallels to the other Gospels. To add to our difficulties, most of the chapters are long. There is, of

course, no reason why our sermons must correspond to the chapter divisions in the Bible, but in John the chapter divisions are a helpful guide, because they largely correspond with the natural divisions of the book.

If we wanted to preach through the entire Gospel of John but feared the congregation might become tired of an extended series, we could break the book into two parts (Chapters 1-12 and 13-21). We may lose some of the book's overall impact, but that may be the price we have to pay for maintaining the congregation's interest. If we wanted more than twelve sermons to cover the first twelve chapters, we could break the book further and increase the number of sermons per chapter. Much will depend on the number of talks available in the church's program.

Our working example is based on an arrangement of twelve talks covering John Chapters 1-12. There is no need to cover exactly one chapter in each talk, but for this exercise we shall assume that this is the arrangement. Our example is based on Chapter 7 and shows how to deal with a long chapter (the average length of these chapters is about fifty verses) in a thirty-minute expository sermon. We do not want to get stuck on two or three favourite verses, but neither do we want to fly over the top in a mere survey. We want to read, explain and apply the text, so that the text itself becomes the message. We want the Bible to speak to the hearers.

### **Studying and planning**

As we saw earlier, the essential requirement for this kind of preaching is familiarity with the text. Without this, we shall have difficulty putting our theoretical techniques into practice. In the working example, we shall assume that we have completed our preparation study, and now we must decide how to handle the material. The chapter concerns Jesus' appearance at the Feast of Tabernacles (or Festival of Shelters) in Jerusalem.

For purposes of preaching, we could divide the chapter in a number of ways. The simplest seems to be to divide it into three sections – the beginning of the festival (verses 1-13), the middle

of the festival (verses 14-36), and the end of the festival (verses 37-52). These divisions may not represent the major headings or important points of the sermon, but they give us a framework in which to operate. Because of this framework, we always know where we are as our exposition develops.

Suppose, having studied the chapter, we conclude that a fitting title would be 'The Problem of the Will'. If we want to give a number of headings during the sermon, we might think of some that relate to the title. Our headings could, for instance, centre on characteristics of the will displayed in the chapter (arrogance, prejudice, stubbornness, contempt) or they could centre on various kinds of people (immediate family, ordinary citizens, religious leaders, genuine believers). These are largely matters of a preacher's style, and are not the concern of our working example. Its concern is with explaining the text, which is always our first responsibility, but it still leaves us free to develop the material according to our different styles.

### **The beginning of the festival**

To introduce the chapter, we should make a brief comment on the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (or Shelters). This was an annual week-long festival when people lived in temporary shelters to commemorate their ancestors' years in the wilderness. It was also a celebration to mark the end of the agricultural year, and in Jesus' time included a daily water-pouring ceremony to express thanks for God's life-giving gifts through nature.

That is all we need say to provide a background to the festival. If we are not careful we can create problems for ourselves by spending too much time on background or introductory comments. Suddenly we find we have only twenty-three minutes left and we have not yet expounded one verse. If we lose control of our material within the first five minutes, we shall probably be in difficulty for the rest of the sermon.

Our other brief introductory comment should concern Jesus' brothers. They did not believe he was the Messiah, and made the suggestion, sarcastically it seems, that if he wanted to prove his messiahship, he should go to Jerusalem and perform some

spectacular miracles. The time was right, because huge crowds would be there to witness his feats. But Jesus refused to seek fame in such a way. He would continue to preach God's message, even if it made him unpopular, and he would not go with his brothers to Jerusalem. At this point we read verses 2-7, adding explanatory notes as we go and making a contrast between Jesus and us. Unlike him, we easily give in to the temptation to promote ourselves, especially when the circumstances are favourable.

There is no need to read further from this section. We tell the audience, however, that after the festival had begun, Jesus went to Jerusalem, though he tried to avoid publicity. This was difficult, because he was a controversial figure and people everywhere held widely different opinions about him.

We may note here another simple device to help us move smoothly through the text. We have already suggested drawing a line in the margin to mark the verses we read aloud. Concerning the verses we skip over or summarize, we can underline key words in the text, rather than write them in our preaching notes. This saves space in our notes, and enables us to see the important words in the text without reading every sentence.

In verses 10-13, summarized above, the words to underline would be 'he also went', 'in secret' and 'much talk about him'. Because the text provides us with our notes, we can paraphrase confidently and, if we wish, occasionally draw our hearers' attention to significant words that are not part of the section we have chosen to read.

### The middle of the festival

This is a key part of the sermon, and we begin by reading verses 14-17. We then point out how Jesus waited till the middle of the week before he began to preach. By this time the initial excitement had died down and people were more likely to listen rationally to what he said.

As usual people had various assessments of Jesus and his teaching, but he explained to them that his message was not a

philosophy or wisdom of his own. It was a message from God. If they were truly submissive to God and ready to do his will, they would recognize the divine origin of his teaching. Their problem was not with the intellect, but with the will. And that is still the problem with many people today.

Within our audience there will be unbelievers as well as believers, and we should take the opportunity to challenge them with the gospel. We do not have to force the Bible to say something that twists the original writer's meaning. We merely have to be alert to the relevance of the Bible in any age. Human nature is remarkably consistent, regardless of race, culture or era, and the attitudes Jesus met are the same as those that we meet today (or that the prophets met in Old Testament times). We should therefore emphasize the truth Jesus states in verse 17, and quote it again when we meet further difficulties of the human will later in the chapter.

To focus on the people's response to Jesus' words, we can skip verses 18-24 (with a brief comment that they refer largely to an incident already dealt with in a previous chapter). We start reading from verse 25, using expression and imagination to help our audience picture the scene in Jerusalem as people ask questions about Jesus: 'Is not this the man . . . ? Can it be . . . ? No, it can't be . . . After all, we know . . .' We then read Jesus' response, where he uses some of their words to show how short-sighted they are. We conclude in verse 29, where Jesus' meaning is that his real place of origin is heaven. He came from God.

When the people at the festival saw Jesus' meaning, some were angry but others believed. This gives us further opportunity to make our hearers see that they cannot be neutral concerning Jesus. We could highlight this by referring to the contrasts in verses 30 and 31, without actually reading the verses.

To drive this point home, we could read verses 33-35. The Jewish leaders sent temple guards to arrest Jesus, but they were powerless to do anything. Jesus was in command of the situation. He told them (though not in exactly these words) that he would die only when the time appointed by his Father had come, after

which he would rise from death and return to heaven. And that was a place where they would never find him, because they would never get there. Unbelief excludes people from heaven, a truth of immediate significance to our audience.

### The end of the festival

In introducing the final section, we can refer to the climax of the festival and the symbolism of the water-pouring ceremony. Water helps sustain life in the physical creation, but Jesus offers something far better (read verse 37). He offers not ordinary water but living water, something that satisfies people's deepest spiritual needs through changing them within. But the only ones who receive this living water are those who, realizing their need, come to him for help. Again, the deciding factor is the will more than the intellect – 'if any one thirst, let him come to me'.

We read on, pointing out from verses 38 and 39 that when people come in faith to Christ, they are so changed that this new life flows out, as it were, to others. This is a reference to the Spirit-filled life that Christ desires for all his people. We should take the opportunity to remind our audience (and ourselves) that Christianity is not a set of beliefs about Christ but a life lived in union with Christ. However, we shall not have time to speak at length on the matter.

Rather we must move on to show how the festival concludes. We read verses 40-42 in the same imaginative way as we read verses 25-27, and note again the division between believers and unbelievers. We cannot remain neutral concerning Jesus.

Meanwhile the temple guards returned to the Jewish leaders, but without Jesus. We should read their powerful testimony in verse 46, for we trust that our hearers have begun to feel likewise as they have considered Jesus' words. At the same time, they will probably despise the Jewish leaders as we read verses 47-52. With unbounded arrogance, these rulers asserted that the only people who believed in Jesus were the ignorant and uneducated; whereas among the elite, such as themselves, there was not one who believed! This was a bold assertion, but it may not have been true, because one of their group, Nicodemus, pleaded

that at least they give Jesus a fair hearing. But they dismissed Nicodemus' plea with contempt.

The Jewish leaders were not interested in finding out the truth; their sole concern was to get rid of Jesus. Because they had stubbornly set their wills against Jesus, their minds were incapable of seeing the truth. They were a living proof of the truth Jesus had spoken about earlier: if people are willing to submit to God, they will soon understand the truth (read verse 17 again). Without such surrender, however, they will do everything possible to avoid facing reality. The problem is with the human will, which is why the Bible constantly calls us to repentance and faith. For without repentance and faith, we can never receive the life God offers.

### **Further suggestions**

Although the chapter contains fifty-two verses, we have asked the congregation to read only thirty. We have covered the main development of the chapter, made applications of the text that should challenge the hearers, and above all have allowed the text itself to provide the substance of the sermon. Our prayer should be that as people understand what the chapter says, they will make an obedient response. We do all this preaching and praying with more words and feeling than this brief working example indicates, but always we want the impact of our sermon to come from the Bible rather than from us.

Again we might remind ourselves that, while our purpose in expository preaching is to feed people with the Word of God, we should not try to exhaust the meaning of every verse. We aim to build people up spiritually, but we do not want them to remain dependent on our preaching. Rather we want them to be so enlightened as they move through the portion of Scripture with us, that they will want to read further for themselves when they go home. Once this begins to happen, we have achieved something of lasting value.

## Expounding the New Testament (ii)

### **Examples, not models**

The working examples in this book illustrate ways of dealing with different kinds of biblical books, but they are not models. That is, we ought not to think that the example of John's Gospel is a model we must follow in all its details for each long book in the New Testament. All our working examples contain elements that may or may not be useful in other books. Some features in our example from John's Gospel may not work well in another New Testament book of comparable length, while other features may work very well in a short Old Testament book.

By considering a number of working examples, we see not only how to deal with specific kinds of biblical books, but also how to be flexible in handling *all* biblical books. No matter how short or long, how easy or difficult a book may be, we should always be able to work out some way to handle it.

An important matter that we have not yet considered is the historical background of an Old Testament prophet or New Testament letter. Because of the way we dealt with Isaiah, we did not explain the entire historical background at the beginning of the first talk. In most cases, however, we should give the background before we attempt to expound the text. The present chapter is concerned primarily with the exposition of a short New Testament letter, but it also provides an example of how we might introduce our hearers to a book's background. If they do not know who is writing to whom and why he is writing, they are unlikely to understand the contents of his letter. Our working example is 1 Thessalonians.

### **Adapting to the time available**

In many ways the shorter New Testament letters (and the shorter Old Testament prophets) are the easiest books to teach in a series of sermons. Because they have few chapters, the books

can usually fit conveniently into the church's preaching program. We can probably assume we would be given four weeks to cover a book of four chapters. We may even be given more time; we would rarely be given less.

On the basis of one chapter per talk, we could expect to be given eight weeks to deal with Paul's two letters to the Thessalonians – five for the first letter and three for the second. But most of the chapters in Thessalonians are short compared with those in other letters, and we may be allotted only six talks – four for the first letter and two for the second. Either way, our first talk on 1 Thessalonians would include the background to the letter (drawn partly from Acts) along with Chapter 1. Whether we deal with the remaining chapters in four talks or three, we should be able to adjust our material to suit.

In outlining the background to a letter, we should ask our hearers to read the relevant verses in Acts or other writings, so that they can see the information for themselves. This reduces the number of verses from the letter that we can expound in the opening talk, though we should ensure that the letter itself, and not the background, provides the main part of the sermon. We want to get well into the letter, and not conclude our talk with the opening greetings of the first two or three verses.

With only ten verses in the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, we have ample time for the background, but we should avoid the temptation to give too much detail from Acts. We should do better to spend time in other parts of Thessalonians that provide further background material and help our hearers taste the flavour of the book. This will also save us time in later talks when we expound those parts of the letter.

### **Founding the Thessalonian church**

A map is essential for our background to Thessalonians. Having asked our hearers to turn to Acts 17:1, we point out (with the aid of the map) that Paul and his two associates, Silas and Timothy, travelled from Philippi to Thessalonica. These were cities of Macedonia in the north of ancient Greece. We can then summarize how, over the next three weeks, they preached in the

synagogue and many believed. This brings us to verse 5, which we read. The Jews were jealous of Paul's success, and with the help of local hooligans started a riot and attacked the house of Jason, where they thought Paul was staying. We go on to summarize how, when they could not find Paul, they dragged Jason before the city officials and accused him of sheltering a group of Jewish rebels. The officials forced Jason to make a security payment as guarantee that there would be no more trouble, and then released him (read verse 9).

Jason's guarantee may have meant that Paul would have to leave the city and not return (at least in the near future). Paul and his party managed to escape secretly, and went on to another Macedonian city, Berea (read verse 10). Again many believed, again the Jews stirred up a riot, and again Paul had to flee. This time he escaped to Athens, followed soon by Silas and Timothy (read verses 14-15).

Although the book of Acts traces the overall route of Paul's travels, it does not detail all his movements. It concentrates on those matters that are relevant to its purpose. Paul's writings, on the other hand, give no chronological account of his travels, but mention matters of importance to him that are not included in Acts. When we read Acts in conjunction with Paul's writings, we get a fuller picture of events.

From 1 Thessalonians, for instance, we learn that when Silas and Timothy met Paul in Athens, he sent them back to the Macedonian churches from which he had just come. We know that Timothy went to Thessalonica, and we assume that Silas went to either Philippi or Berea. We do not at this stage ask our hearers to turn to the biblical references; we merely give them the information, knowing that we shall come to the relevant verses shortly.

Meanwhile, we recount how Paul was left alone in Athens, where evangelism was difficult and only a few people believed. We can summarize this in a few sentences, and then ask people to read Acts 18:1. After noting that Paul moved across to Corinth, we summarize his early success there. We then read

verse 5, which tells us that Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth from Macedonia and brought Paul news of the churches there. The news that Timothy brought from Thessalonica prompted Paul to write the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians. We now turn to that letter.

### **Paul writes to the Thessalonians**

Our first aim in turning to Thessalonians is to show how it confirms what we have just learnt from Acts. Therefore, before beginning our exposition, we shall look at four short selections from the letter. Though we do not say so, this is a valuable exercise in showing people the importance of knowing the background from Acts if they are to understand Paul's letters.

When we ask people to turn to Thessalonians, they will naturally open at the first chapter. So we draw their attention briefly to the first verse, which tells us what we have just noted from Acts 18:5, namely, that Silas and Timothy were with Paul in Corinth when he wrote this letter. Most people find the opening verses of Paul's letters uninteresting, and though we point out one item of interest, we move quickly on to something else. We ask the audience to go to Chapter 2 verse 17-18.

Here Paul refers to his hasty departure from Thessalonica. Timothy had apparently brought him news that some of the Thessalonians accused him of selfishness and cowardice for leaving them so quickly. They asserted that he thought only of himself, not of them. Paul sounds almost broken-hearted in his reply. His pain in being separated from them is like the pain of losing his closest relative. But he is not separated from them in spirit. He longs to see them and has tried repeatedly to visit them, but each time Satan has stopped him. We could, depending on the amount of text to be covered in later talks, comment also on verses 19-20, to emphasize Paul's love for the Thessalonians and his joy at their spiritual progress.

These verses give us the opportunity to make a pastoral comment on the danger of making judgments about people's motives. Paul's failure to return to Thessalonica was not because of any cowardice or lack of interest on his part. Perhaps Jason's

guarantee to the local officials prevented Paul's return. We do not know the details, but we do know that Satan puts all sorts of obstacles in the way of God's servants. We might think of practical examples to emphasize the significance of this point to the congregation.

Another significant point arises in the next verses, Chapter 3 verses 1-2. Some people easily become discouraged, but not Paul. When he was unable to return to Thessalonica, he did not just sit idle or complain of frustration; he did the next best thing and sent Timothy instead.

Although Satan may put obstacles in our path, we need not give in to him. We must be positive and look for ways to get around the obstacles, though we may find, as Paul did, that it is costly to us personally. In Paul's case it meant he had to lose the support of his fellow workers, because when he sent Timothy and Silas back to Macedonia, he was left to face the difficulties of Athens alone. Verses 1-2 confirm what we saw in Acts 17. The truth that Paul faced, and that all of us today must face, is that service on behalf of others involves sacrifice of our own preferences and convenience.

We could continue with comments on verses 3-5, but this again will depend on the amount of material we have to cover in later talks. We conclude this set of readings by asking the audience to look at verse 6, which ties in with Acts 18:5. Timothy has returned from Thessalonica, and meets Paul in Corinth with the news that the Thessalonian church has gone from strength to strength. Paul is overjoyed and sits down to write the letter that we are now about to read.

### **Other matters of interest**

At this point we are ready to start expounding Chapter 1, but before we do so we might briefly inform the audience of other news that Timothy brought from Thessalonica. The church was persecuted by local anti-Christian groups, and troubled within by a selfish minority who unfairly criticized Paul. Some were slow to learn the new standards of morality that Christian faith demanded of them, while others were lazy in their work and

unnecessarily dependent on the kindness of others. There were also misunderstandings about the return of Christ.

There is no need to turn to the verses that mention these issues, because we shall meet them as we move through the letter. But we have prepared the audience for what is ahead. In all these matters the Thessalonians showed themselves to be ordinary human beings, similar in many ways to Christians today. Once we see what Paul was saying to them, we can see what God is saying to us.

### **More than a background**

Our treatment of the opening sermon on Thessalonians is a little different from what we might normally do, mainly because of the uneven lengths of the first two chapters. There is a natural break at the end of Chapter 1 (which consists of only ten verses), but the next natural break does not come till the end of verse 16 in Chapter 2. The time for a background to 1 Thessalonians is about ten minutes, which means that if we wanted to reach Chapter 2 verse 16, we should have to move through almost two chapters in less than twenty minutes. A rushed introduction and a rushed exposition of almost two chapters would be too much to handle comfortably in thirty minutes.

If, however, we decide to go no further than Chapter 1 in our opening talk, we increase the amount of material we must handle in subsequent talks. We decide, therefore, to stop at the end of Chapter 1, but our background will include additional material from other chapters. This has a twofold advantage. First, it gives people a better taste of the book, and second, it saves time later, when we need only touch lightly on portions already explained. Our background has done more than collect information. It has included exposition of significant verses and made applications. Our hearers are already into the body of the book, even though we shall finish our sermon at the end of Chapter 1.

### **Genuine Christianity**

We begin Chapter 1 by reading verses 2 and 3, and drawing our hearers' attention to Paul's mention of faith, hope and love.

We must, however, resist the temptation to preach a mini-sermon based on the inviting outline Paul has given us. We might comment on the sorts of things Paul prays about and the qualities he finds admirable in Christians, but we shall need to move on. We want to build on the knowledge of the Thessalonian church that we have presented in our introduction, drawing attention to two main points. The first of these occurs in verses 4-7 and concerns genuineness of faith. The second occurs in verses 8-10 and concerns enthusiasm in service.

One proof of the genuineness of the Thessalonians' faith was the way they stood firm for the gospel. They had accepted the gospel not as an attractive philosophy but as a message from God with the power to change lives. Their conviction came not through the impressive words of the preachers but through the Holy Spirit who pierced their hearts with the truth of God. Yet the role of the preachers was important, because their lives confirmed the truth of the message they preached. All this is mentioned in verses 4-5 and gives us scope to apply the teaching to present-day people, preachers and hearers alike.

A further point about genuine faith arises in verses 6-7. Those who heard Paul preach in Thessalonica saw the opposition he met, and he assured them that if they believed the gospel, they too would meet opposition. He did not urge people to accept the gospel as a cheap way to receive earthly benefits, and therefore people did not respond to his message with false motives. They knew what to expect if they embraced the gospel, because Paul had shown them by his example and told them in plain language (read also 2:2-3 and 3:3-4). The only Christian life they knew was one of persecution, but the joy they showed through their trials made them an example to other Christians. Again, there is ample scope to challenge and encourage as we explain and apply Paul's words.

### **Enthusiastic outreach**

The Thessalonians were an example not only in their steadfastness amid persecution, but also in their enthusiasm for spreading the gospel (read verse 8). At times we think of stead-

fastness as something negative, such as withstanding attacks or bearing hardship, but for the Thessalonians it was something positive. Far from retreating, or even standing still, they pushed forward. The way they strengthened their church was to expand its mission into the regions round about. Paul did not need to boast to others about the Thessalonians' enthusiasm; everybody seemed to know already! The Thessalonians did not consider the church to be a sort of club that existed for the benefit of the members. They saw it as a base from which to reach into a lost community with God's message of life.

All of us can learn from the example of the Thessalonians. We can challenge ourselves and our hearers with the record Paul has left for us in this letter. We may feel ashamed as we compare ourselves with those first century Christians, but we need not leave our hearers feeling defeated. The chapter finishes on a high note, and so should our sermon.

As we read and comment on verses 9-10, we note how Paul talks about the transformation that has taken place in these believers. Once in bondage to lifeless idols, they are now servants of the living God. Though persecuted, they share the life of the risen Christ. Because they have suffered with him, they will also reign with him. They can look forward with joy to the return of Christ, when he, the righteous judge, will give to them the crown of righteousness; and not to them only, but also to all who long for his appearing (2 Tim 4:8).

## 12

### Planning the teaching program

#### **The task of church leaders**

If we are church leaders, we have a responsibility to feed the church that God has placed in our care. The common biblical picture of church leaders is that of shepherds who care for the flock (John 21:15-17; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

An emphasis in this picture is that the responsibility lies with the shepherds rather than the flock. We must take the initiative in providing the flock with the right sort of food. We cannot avoid this responsibility by hoping that someone else might feel God's leading or that we ourselves might get special 'thoughts' as each meeting approaches. God has given us the task of feeding the church, and we must work out how to do this. Good shepherds do not simply hope their sheep get fed, just as good parents do not simply hope their children find some food.

When Paul urged the Ephesian leaders to feed the church, he reminded them how he had fed them. He had taught them the whole purpose of God, and in this he is an example to us (Acts 20:27-28). We have to work out ways of providing the church with a balanced diet of teaching that covers all areas of God's revelation. This will include preaching on books of the Bible as well as on topics of doctrine and practice drawn from the Bible. Our aim is not just to pass on knowledge, but to minister to the pastoral needs of the church.

#### **For any church, anywhere**

Often we have difficulty working out programs and timetables. The program offered in this book suggests one way of ensuring that we feed the church with a balanced diet of teaching. We should treat the program as only a guide, and not think we must follow it in all its details. The program can be changed to suit a range of churches, and in fact has been adapted in different ways in various countries over many years.

<b>PLAN A</b>				
<b>1st Quarter</b>	OT	Joshua, Judges, Ruth	6 talks	
	NT	Psalms	6	
	Topical	Acts	6	
		Home and Society	6	
<b>2nd Quarter</b>	OT	Proverbs	6 talks	
	NT	Romans	12	
	Topical	Church and Mission	6	
<b>3rd Quarter</b>	OT	Jeremiah, Lamentations	12 talks	
	NT	Matthew	6	
	Topical	Authority of the Bible	6	
<b>4th Quarter</b>	OT	Genesis	6 talks	
	NT	Ephesians	6	
		1 and 2 Peter, Jude	6	
	Topical	God	6	

<b>PLAN B</b>				
<b>1st Quarter</b>	OT	1 and 2 Kings; Chronicles	12 talks	
	NT	John 1-12	6	
	Topical	Christian Life and Service	6	
<b>2nd Quarter</b>	OT	Isaiah 1-39	6 talks	
	NT	1 and 2 Corinthians	12	
	Topical	Church History	6	
<b>3rd Quarter</b>	OT	Ezekiel	6 talks	
		Hosea; Joel	6	
	NT	Mark	6	
	Topical	Sin and Salvation	6	
<b>4th Quarter</b>	OT	Exodus	6 talks	
	NT	Colossians; Philemon	6	
		1, 2 and 3 John	6	
	Topical	Person and Work of Christ	6	

<b>PLAN C</b>				
<b>1st Quarter</b>	OT	1 and 2 Samuel Psalms	6 talks 6	
	NT	New Testament Background	6	
	Topical	Christian Ethics	6	
<b>2nd Quarter</b>	OT	Ecclesiastes; Song of Songs	6 talks	
	NT	Revelation	12	
	Topical	Church and Mission	6	
<b>3rd Quarter</b>	OT	Amos to Zephaniah	12 talks	
	NT	Luke	6	
	Topical	Return of Christ	6	
<b>4th Quarter</b>	OT	Leviticus; Numbers	6 talks	
	NT	Galatians	6	
		1 and 2 Thessalonians	6	
	Topical	Holy Spirit	6	

<b>PLAN D</b>				
<b>1st Quarter</b>	OT	Ezra; Nehemiah; Esther Job	6 talks 6	
	NT	John 13-21	6	
	Topical	Christian Life and Service	6	
<b>2nd Quarter</b>	OT	Isaiah 40-66	6 talks	
	NT	Hebrews; James	12	
	Topical	Cults; Other Religions	6	
<b>3rd Quarter</b>	OT	Daniel	6 talks	
		Haggai to Malachi	6	
	NT	Matthew; Mark; Luke	6	
	Topical	Heaven and Hell	6	
<b>4th Quarter</b>	OT	Deuteronomy	6 talks	
	NT	Philippians; Timothy; Titus	12	
	Topical	Person and Work of Christ	6	

Weekly routines vary from one church to another, and therefore this program does not attempt to cover the full range of church activities. It is based on a simple plan that covers one year at a time, with the year divided into four quarters. For convenience each quarter is reckoned to have twelve weeks, which leaves one week free.

There are two talks per week, making twenty-four talks for the quarter. (In discussing this program we may speak of 'talks' rather than 'sermons', 'meetings' rather than 'services', and 'teaching' rather than 'preaching', because the program allows for group studies and discussions as well as sermons from the pulpit.) One of the two weekly talks would be for the main church service on Sunday, designated Meeting 1. The other weekly talk could be for a second Sunday service (e.g. family, outreach or teaching service, whether morning or evening), or a mid-week study group. This is designated Meeting 2. We can enlarge or reduce the program to cater for more or fewer meetings as we desire, but the simple plan of twelve weeks (24 talks) provides a base to work from.

Certain books or topics are more suitable for Meeting 1, others for Meeting 2. Much will depend on the purpose and style of the meeting and the sorts of people who attend. If, however, the Bible and related topics are dealt with properly, everyone should benefit, whether Christian or non-Christian. People respond to the Bible when they hear it explained clearly and see its relevance to present-day issues.

Although a program may be helpful, our emphasis must always be on the quality of the teaching. A program can do no more than set out a scheme for teaching; whether the teaching is beneficial will depend largely on those who give it. Nevertheless, even where there is a shortage of suitable teachers, the program in a sense demands no more of a church than what it probably does at present. Most churches already have their equivalents of Meeting 1 and Meeting 2. The advantage gained by this program is that the teaching at those meetings, instead of being random or haphazard, now has an overall plan and purpose.

For simplicity, the program assumes that the teaching time available in each meeting is thirty minutes. In some cases this time may need to be reduced and in others increased, but we can still use the program as a framework in which to plan.

### A balanced diet

The program consists of three main areas of teaching – Old Testament, New Testament and topical. Since the year is broken into four quarters, each of the three main areas of teaching is broken into four parts, so that in each quarter the church receives teaching from the Old Testament, teaching from the New Testament and teaching on important topics. If we look at the combined content of the four quarters, we shall find that over the year the church receives teaching on a range of biblical books and topical issues.

Each of the four one-year plans set out on pages 112-113 is different, though all follow the same pattern and all contain the same balance in the allocation of biblical books and topics. If we use them consecutively over four years, we shall cover all the books of the Bible and all the chief areas of Christian doctrine and practice.

In introducing the program, however, we may do better not to think of the whole four years. We should plan in detail for only one year (e.g. Plan A) and see how the church responds. Many people hesitate to adopt long-term programs, in case they become caught in a system that leaves them no freedom. Their hesitation is understandable, though they will probably appreciate the church's efforts to have an overall plan for the year. Most will get confused if we give them too many details in advance, but we should at least inform them regularly of plans for the coming weeks or months. We should also encourage them to read relevant Bible portions at home in preparation for the talks to follow in church.

Experience has shown that the one-year program usually goes well, and soon we have to work out the program for the next year (Plan B). If that also goes well, we carry on with the next one-year program (Plan C). This sort of arrangement can go

on indefinitely, because if we complete four years we begin again with the first program. This does not mean that we repeat talks of four years earlier, but that we follow the same overall framework. Within that framework we then work out fresh ways of dealing with the biblical books and topics.

This brings us to the practical details. How do we plan our local church preaching arrangements within the framework of the one-year program?

### **Working out the details**

We shall make our task easier if we plan well ahead (preferably six months) and deal with one quarter at a time. The speakers to be used would normally include suitably gifted preachers from within the church along with preachers invited from elsewhere. The program also provides opportunities to develop local gift. We want the local Christians to use their God-given abilities, and we should look for suitable subjects and occasions that will enable them to do this.

Most preachers are pleased to handle whatever book or topic we suggest. With six months notice they have ample time to prepare, even for an unfamiliar subject. Young trainee preachers from our own church may need guidance in preparation, but other preachers should be given the freedom to handle subjects in their own way.

In dealing with a biblical book, for example, one preacher may give straight exposition with application, while another may trace themes in a book. One may choose certain sections or verses, while another may deal with selected characters or issues within the book. Different approaches guarantee considerable variety. When we come round to the same book four years later, we can ensure that it is dealt with differently from the previous occasion.

Flexibility is important when working out the diary of meetings for the quarter. The number of talks shown in the program is only a guide, and can be increased or decreased to suit local needs. There is normally no problem in interrupting or

adjusting the program at short notice to deal with an urgent or unexpected local issue.

### **Working examples**

The working examples on the following pages show how the 1st and 2nd Quarters for Plan A can be arranged. The allocation of subjects between Meeting 1 and Meeting 2 will vary, depending on the style of meetings. Some biblical books are more suitable for preaching in church, others for use in discussion groups.

In the working examples we assume that Meeting 2 is a regular weekly church service, and therefore its program for the 1st Quarter has been broken at certain points through the insertion of selected Psalms. If, however, Meeting 2 represented home Bible study groups, we might prefer not to break a series but to move through consecutively till it was finished. In this case, the six talks on Home and Society could all be allocated to Meeting 2 and the six on Psalms to Meeting 1, or vice versa.

In working out the detailed quarterly arrangements, we must try to maintain balance. We want continuity and coherence, especially when dealing with a biblical book, but at the same time we need variety. The person who plans the details should have a good working knowledge of the Bible in order to know how to deal with different books.

Although we might prefer one speaker to handle an entire book, for the sake of variety we may sometimes decide otherwise. In the case of Judges, for example, once the opening speaker has given a suitable introduction or survey of the book, other speakers might deal with the four judges mentioned. But such a break-up would not be advisable for all books. Of the Wisdom books, for example, Proverbs could be handled in a variety of ways by a variety of speakers, but Ecclesiastes would need to be handled entirely by one person. We may allow various speakers to handle selected parts of Matthew's Gospel, but we are unlikely to do the same with the book of Revelation.

<b>PLAN A - 1st Quarter</b>		
	<i>Meeting 1</i>	<i>Meeting 2</i>
3 Jan	True worship (Ps 50)	God's earth (Ps 104)
10	The unchanging God (Ps 102)	The Christian and the family
17	The joy of forgiveness (Ps 32)	The Christian and the community
24	[To be decided]	The Christian and the government
31	Who were the judges? (Judges Intro/Survey)	Making the most of life (Ps 90)
7 Feb	Deborah (Judg 4-5)	Why do the wicked prosper? (Ps 77)
14	Gideon (Judg 6-8)	The infant church (Acts 1-7)
21	Jephthah (Judg 10-12)	The growing church (Acts 8-12)
28	Samson (Judg 13-16)	The missionary church (Acts 13-15)
7 Mar	Naomi, Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 1-4)	[To be decided]
14	The Christian and work	Paul goes into Europe (Acts 16-18)
21	The Christian and leisure	Consolidating the churches (Acts 19-20)
28	The Christian and suffering	Defeat turned into victory (Acts 21-28)

<b>PLAN A - 2nd Quarter</b>		
	<i>Meeting 1</i>	<i>Meeting 2</i>
4 Apr	What the church is – and what it is not	Why salvation is necessary (Rom 1)
11	Gifts in the local church	Religion can be deceiving (Rom 2)
18	Fellowship in the local church	Sinners declared righteous (Rom 3)
25	Strategies for youth evangelism	By grace, through faith (Rom 4-5)
2 May	Learn God's wisdom (from Proverbs 1-9)	[To be decided]
9	Develop self-discipline (from Proverbs 1-9)	Freedom from sin (Rom 6)
16	Don't be a troublemaker (from Proverbs 1-9)	The old life and the new (Rom 7-8a)
23	[To be decided]	The Christian's confidence (Rom 8)
30	How Israel went wrong (Rom 9-10)	The challenge of the unreached world
6 Jun	The great family of God (Rom 11)	The challenge of militant world religions
13	Christians in society (Rom 12-13)	Wise words about anger (from Proverbs 10-17)
20	Rights and privileges (Rom 14-15)	Wise words about money (from Proverbs 18-24)
27	Always thinking ahead (Rom 15-16)	Wise words about ambition (from Proverbs 25-31)

The listing of a biblical book in the program does not mean that we must deal with the whole of that book. Notice that although Joshua, Judges and Ruth are listed for the 1st Quarter, Joshua is not even touched (it can be dealt with some other time), and the talks on Judges are mainly built around selected characters.

If we consider six talks on Acts insufficient for an adequate treatment of the book, we increase the number. We can do this by reducing the number of talks for some other book or topic that quarter, and perhaps by using the two periods designated 'To be decided'. Looking ahead, we note that six talks are allocated to New Testament Background in Program C, and these may give further opportunity to deal with Acts. (Similarly, if elsewhere in the program we consider six talks on each of Matthew, Mark and Luke insufficient, we can use the provision for further treatment of these Gospels in Plan D.)

Moving on to the working example for the 2nd Quarter of Plan A, we note how the treatment of Proverbs demonstrates another way to handle a book. Instead of preaching through chapter after chapter with verse-by-verse exposition, we deal with selected subjects found scattered through the book. If we invite a number of speakers to handle these subjects, the allotment of chapters gives them specified areas within which to work, and so eases the demands on their preparation time. The talks in this case need not be consecutive. They could be given singly or in pairs, depending on how we wanted to arrange other parts of the program.

Local requirements vary from church to church, and from year to year within the same church. One church may handle the book of Romans in twelve talks as shown in the working example, but another may handle it differently. The working example shows how the first eight chapters could be used to preach the gospel in Meeting 2, and the second eight chapters used to challenge Christians in Meeting 1. If a church decided to study the book in greater detail than the number of talks allows, it could increase the number of studies or reduce the number of chapters to be covered.

The doctrinal and practical topics listed in the program represent broad categories, so that almost any subject we might think of can be included within one of the topics. In our working example for the 2nd Quarter, the topic Church and Mission deals mainly with specific matters of church growth and outreach, but wider issues such as worship, prayer and leadership could also be included under this topic. Alternatively, they could be included under Christian Life and Service, a category so broad that it can accommodate most matters not covered elsewhere.

No matter how we work out the teaching arrangements, we must bear in mind constantly that the purpose of the program is not to cover every chapter of every book, or every aspect of every topic. Rather it is to provide a balanced diet of teaching, so that each year we feed the church evenly over a range of biblical books, Christian doctrines and practical subjects.

## Teaching non-Christians

### **A lack of knowledge**

So far we have considered how to teach the Bible in church. We now want to consider how to teach the Bible to those who do not come to church. Our aim is to have a regular study session, preferably once a week, that enables us to explain the gospel from the Bible. But before we can operate such a study, we must persuade people to participate in it. And that may not be easy.

Most people show some sort of belief in a spiritual aspect to human life, even when they profess to have no religion at all. It seems that such a belief is part of human nature. But whether or not people claim to believe in God, they are often hesitant to talk about matters of religion.

This is so even in countries that are nominally Christian. Many people feel they ought to know more about spiritual issues, but they rarely ask those who are in a position to help them. The most likely places to get useful information about Christianity are the church and the Bible, but many people are interested in neither. Their impressions of the church and the Bible are so poor that they find little to attract them. If, however, we can build friendships with them, they may soon be willing for us to explain Christianity to them.

### **Building friendships**

Unfortunately, many Christians fear to make friendships with non-Christians. But any study of the life of Jesus will show us that it can be done, without compromising our principles, lowering our standards or watering down the gospel. This book is not the place to talk at length about relationships, but we must be prepared to pay the price of building friendships with people; and that means being genuinely concerned for them, not just *appearing* to be concerned in the hope of getting an opportunity to ‘preach at’ them. Instead of isolating ourselves from non-

Christians, we should become friends with them. Jesus was known as ‘a friend of sinners’. In the minds of the religious purists this was a criticism, not a compliment; but it was Jesus, not his critics, who led people into the kingdom of God (Matt 11:19; 21:31).

Befriending people may require a change of lifestyle for us. Instead of organizing our lives around things we want to do, we shall have to make sacrifices and changes to fit in with others. Besides helping people in whatever way possible, we might sometimes ask them to help us. People become suspicious if we constantly do things for them but will not allow them to return the favour. We must not only pay the price of becoming part of their activities but also pay the price of allowing them to become part of ours.

Sometimes we do not know how to start these friendships. One way is to get involved in community groups and activities, many of which involve schools, health, sports, cultural interests and social concerns. We can also form more worthwhile relationships with neighbours, relatives and work associates.

In addition, we all belong to churches, where some who attend are not committed Christians and may not even know the gospel. Churches normally have weekly activities that involve the children and youth of unchurched families, and we should build friendships with the parents. They normally appreciate what the church is doing for their children, and if we are alert we shall find plenty of opportunities to call at their houses. With prayer and effort on our part, a relationship will soon build. We want to win their confidence so that in due course they will allow us to start a Bible study with them in their homes.

What we are talking about here is not ‘witnessing’ in the sense of a one-off opportunity to share the gospel. That does not mean we should hesitate to talk about our faith. On the contrary, we should declare it forthrightly, and perhaps give our friends a booklet that explains salvation clearly and simply (for example, *The Christian’s Faith*; see list on page 140.) But what we are aiming for is something longer term, where we can patiently and

carefully go through the basics of Christianity over a period of weeks. And the tool we use to teach them is the Bible.

### Bible study in the non-Christian home

Much useful material has been written about principles and methods of evangelism, and how we should prepare ourselves spiritually and practically for the task. Readers will gain valuable benefits from such material, both for personal evangelism and for church activities. Our concern in this chapter is not to discuss the details of these matters, but to concentrate on the single issue of how to teach the Bible to non-Christians.

When suggesting the Bible study to our friends, we might choose not to call it by the name 'Bible study'. There is no need to give it any specific name, because we do not want people to think we are trying to 'process' them into a religious system. Many will realize that one reason why they are not committed Christians is that they know little about Christianity, and they will appreciate our explaining the purpose of the studies. We want them to look with us at one book of the Bible and see for themselves how Christianity works.

We should tell people that we are asking for only one session a week for six weeks, so that they know they will not be caught indefinitely in something they may not want. Each session should be planned for one hour, though as people's interest grows the sessions might extend beyond the hour, especially if they conclude with a cup of tea or coffee.

If possible we should conduct the Bible study in the home of the non-Christians. They feel comfortable and secure in their own home, and their presence can be assured when the time for the study arrives. The group could consist of only a few, and where it includes a married couple we should normally start the group study only if the husband agrees to be part of it. This stops the men from opting out, and stops us from driving a wedge between husband and wife.

Another point on which to reassure people is that we shall not run a mini church service in their home. There will be no

prayers, songs, or recital of creeds and confessions. Nor will they have to answer questions or fill in tests sheets. Our purpose is not to quiz people on their knowledge, but to use the Bible to explain the gospel as simply and clearly as possible.

### **A book that explains the gospel**

One of the best New Testament books to use in explaining basic Christian beliefs step by step is Romans. Many Christians might be surprised at the suggestion to use Romans with non-Christians, but that is partly because Christians themselves find the book difficult. Most non-Christians do not know one book from another, and since no one has told them that Romans is difficult, they have a better chance of understanding it! Much depends on how we explain the book. Our aim is not to explain every word or even every verse, but to allow Paul's logical explanation of the gospel to become ours.

Although we should assume that the people in the group know little, if anything, about the Bible or the gospel, we should not 'talk down' to them as if they are children. To speak in simple language does not mean to speak in childish language. We should use ordinary non-technical language and treat people as intelligent adults who are interested in spiritual issues. They will usually appreciate a matter-of-fact explanation of something they have not previously understood.

In six weeks we are unlikely to get through the whole book of Romans. Experience has shown, however, that most people do not want to stop after six weeks, and would prefer to continue till the book is finished. But if we get only as far as Chapter 6, we have had ample opportunity to give a clear presentation of the gospel. Let us look briefly at how this is so.

Chapter 1 tells us there is a God, but we have rebelled against him and fallen into sin. As a consequence we have brought God's judgment upon ourselves. It does not matter whether we are from a pagan background (like the Gentiles of Paul's day) or from a respectable God-fearing background (like the Jews of Paul's day), we are all under God's judgment. Chapter 2 makes these points clear, adding that neither self-

righteous behaviour nor religious ceremonies can save us. The first half of Chapter 3 brings this section to its climax: we are all guilty and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves.

But now, says Paul in Chapter 3 verse 21, God shows how he can put guilty sinners right with himself. He does this by grace through Jesus Christ, and we accept his offer of mercy by faith. Salvation has nothing to do with good works, religious rituals or lawkeeping; it is ours solely through faith. Paul gives illustrations of this in Chapter 4, and goes on in the next chapter to show how believers have peace with God and eternal life. This is true for all believers, because no matter how great the sin, God's grace is always sufficient to cover it.

This produces an objection: if salvation is solely by grace through faith, it seems too easy. It almost encourages people to think they can sin as they like, then ask God to forgive and he will. Paul answers this objection in Chapter 6, and goes on in Chapters 7 and 8 to show believers how they should live.

The remainder of the book continues in the same logical way, dealing with issues that non-Christians as well as Christians find interesting and relevant. But even if we cover only the first six chapters, we present the gospel clearly but powerfully. The difficulty we now face is how to explain these chapters without being sidetracked by details and difficulties.

### **Getting started**

As always in our preaching and teaching, a key to success is familiarity with our subject matter. We must study the book of Romans till we are so familiar with its contents that we can move through it with assurance and confidence. No one can do this study and preparation for us. The purpose of the comments that follow is not to teach Romans to the readers of this book, but to suggest certain procedures that might help us in person-to-person studies. The comments are based on our use of Romans, but the procedures can be applied to any book we might teach.

Before starting our studies on Romans, we should give some background to the book. If the people in the group are keen

enough not to require a time limit of six weeks, we could well spend the first study on an introduction to the Bible as a whole. They are usually interested in getting an overall picture of the Bible, and we can use this to help them see Jesus as the centre of the story. The Old Testament leads up to him and the New Testament flows from him.

If we have no time to use the opening study in this way, we could give them a copy of a booklet such as *The Christian's Bible* to read at their leisure (see book list on page 140). This book gives an overall picture of the Bible and answers questions people ask about how the Bible was written. They might also ask other questions (e.g. why people are born crippled, why there are earthquakes, why there is starvation), and we should do our best to answer them, even if the answer is indefinite. People are often relieved when we say we have no clear-cut answers to certain problems, because many have the idea that Christians think the Bible tells them everything. This gives us the opportunity to show that the Bible is not a source book for answers to puzzles, but the revelation of God's way of salvation.

No matter what questions people raise, we should take time to discuss them. And we should not be shocked if people treat the Bible with less respect than we do. Our aim at this stage is not to persuade them to accept our view of the Bible, but to start them reading Paul's letter to the Romans. Once they are reading the Bible, we can let the Bible speak for itself.

We should not assume that people know who Paul is. To introduce him, we point out that although he was not a believer in Jesus' time, he soon became the leading missionary and teacher of the first century. We use a map to show the extent of Paul's early travels, and then turn to the background material in Acts (Chapters 19 and 20) and Romans (Chapters 1 and 15). By a careful selection of verses that mention the important places (Greece, Jerusalem, Rome, Spain), we give an outline of Paul's movements and his reasons for writing the letter.

People appreciate the down-to-earth details. Many have only a vague idea of the Bible, and think of it almost as a book of

fairy tales and holy sayings. We should take every opportunity to draw attention to details that tie the Bible story to the world people know. We may have an atlas in the back of our Bible, but instead of using that to explain Paul's travels, we could use a map from some other source. We could ask our hosts for an atlas their child uses at school, or we may use a National Geographic magazine that has suitable maps and pictures. Our aim is to link the biblical world to the present world by showing that places mentioned in the Bible are still in the news today.

Since most people have heard of Nero, we might mention that he was emperor in Rome at the time the Christians there received Paul's letter. This helps them to think of Paul as a person of history just as much as Nero.

### Moving in the right direction

In our opening study we want to get as far into the book as possible. We also want people to understand what they read and see that our study is going to be instructive. In most cases we should use an easy-read version such as the Good News Bible (preferably with one Bible for each person), though at times there are advantages in having a copy of another version such as the New International Version. This enables us to involve people in discussion by asking what the alternative version says.

Because our study is largely an explanation of the text, we do most of the talking, but when we ask others to read a few words, they feel part of the study. This also enables us to find out how well they can read. If they are poor readers we shall not ask them to read at length, for we do not want to embarrass them, but if they are fluent readers we can ask them to read more.

There is no need to spend much time on the first fifteen verses of Chapter 1. We have already read a number of these in our background to the letter, so we can move on to verses 16 and 17. These are key verses to our understanding of the entire letter. We should point out what Paul is doing in Romans. He is explaining *how* God puts people right with himself (note the GNB's use of 'how' in verse 17). We know that in any era or any country, God saves those who come to him in repentance

and faith (Rom 10:13). The gospel tells us *how* God does this. It explains the ‘theory’ behind the ‘practice’. The book of Romans explains how Christianity works, so to speak.

This is a good time to explain to the group a number of important words that we shall meet repeatedly throughout the book – ‘gospel’, ‘salvation’, ‘faith’, ‘grace’, ‘righteousness’, ‘justification’ and their equivalents in various translations. We should not confuse people, but we can at least introduce the words and give a brief summary of the plan of salvation that will be explained in detail in the next few chapters. There is no need to develop the important points at this stage, but people will appreciate knowing where the book is heading. We are setting the direction of our studies, and at the same time allowing the Bible to be the means of conveying the message.

A simple help is to keep some notepaper beside us while we talk, and write down the important words we meet or comment on (e.g. faith = reliance, trust, belief). We can draw lines, arrows, figures or whatever as we go, making the notes as casual or informal as we like, but by the time we have finished the study, the paper will contain most of the main points. In most people will want to keep the paper and even make copies. As the weeks pass they will build small but valuable collections of our scribbled notes.

### **More than understanding**

One shortcoming in using Romans with non-Christians is that they do not meet Jesus as we see him in the Gospels. Romans tells us how God puts us right with himself (he does it through Jesus), but we must go to the Gospels if we want to see Jesus living in the world, carrying out his work, dying for sin and rising victoriously. The Jesus of the Gospels is the person through whom God does the work of salvation set out in Romans.

Therefore, we should invite those in the group to read one of the Gospels for themselves during the next few weeks. We should make this suggestion on the second night rather than the first, and suggest they read Luke, as that gives the fullest

coverage of our Lord's life. Less fluent readers might read Mark instead, as it is shorter, but either way we want them to read the book through to the end. Certainly, we want people to understand the gospel (from our studies in Romans), but we also want them to meet Jesus (from their reading of the Gospels). We want to inform them of the truth, but we also want to introduce them to a person. We want them not only to understand the 'theory' of the cross, but also to know the person who died there.

### **The unfolding plan of salvation**

Once we have introduced people to the outline of Romans, we then start reading at Chapter 1 verse 18, where Paul begins his step-by-step explanation of God's work of salvation. Here we draw upon the techniques discussed earlier in this book (see Chapters 8-11), though we shall move more quickly than we would in a sermon to the church. We shall read the text as freely as possible, and not get sidetracked with difficult verses or words. People find the Good News Bible easy to follow and largely self-explanatory, provided we introduce each section by telling them what Paul is talking about.

When we adopt this free-reading approach, people soon find themselves moving along with Paul. They often feel relaxed enough to offer comments without our asking them pointed questions. As we move through quickly to the end of Chapter 1, they readily see the more obvious sins as worthy of God's judgment. But we should draw their attention to the less obvious sins, which we may think are excusable because we all are guilty of them. Gossip and jealousy are just as worthy of God's judgment as are murder and sexual depravity.

Hypocrisy is a failing of which non-Christians often accuse Christians, and our readers may be pleased to see Paul condemn it so strongly in Chapter 2. But in this chapter he also talks about the judgment people face when they despise God's tolerance, ignore the voice of conscience, or trust for their security in religious rites. At the beginning of Chapter 3 he argues a point with the Jews that may not be of interest to our readers, and then moves to the climax in verses 19-20. We can focus on these

verses to show that as sinners we are guilty before God, and nothing we do can save ourselves from his just punishment.

We should reach Chapter 3 verse 20 no later than the end of our second study. The next study will be almost entirely concerned with the remainder of Chapter 3, because this is where God's way of salvation is explained. We should move carefully through each verse, to show how God can save us from our hopeless position and put us right with himself.

This section deals with many of the questions people have in their minds, particularly the issue of salvation by faith, not by works. We should therefore allow opportunity for argument and discussion. It does not matter if our timetable is spoiled, as we can move through Chapter 4 quickly if necessary. Non-Christians will probably not be familiar with the people and events Paul uses as illustrations in Chapter 4, so we need not confuse them with detailed explanations. When we come to Chapter 5, we can slow down again.

### **Need for a response**

The first half of Chapter 5 gives Christians the right to assurance, and brings us back to the basis of salvation in Christ's death and resurrection. As we progress through Romans we should look for suitable points where we can challenge people about their personal response to what they have learnt. We should not do this before they understand the gospel, but neither should we be hesitant once we see that they do understand. We must be sensitive to their inner conflicts, but also sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit within ourselves.

If we have not yet presented the members of our group with the need for a firm commitment to Christ, the second half of Chapter 5 provides an excellent opportunity to do so. People are not Christians by nature; quite the opposite. By nature we are all sinners and doomed for a just punishment, but Christ died and arose to save us from punishment and give us the life God intended for us originally. However, the only way we receive the benefits of Christ's work is through faith. We renounce our own efforts to earn salvation, and accept the gift God offers through

Christ. By physical birth we are all natural descendants of Adam, but only by faith are we spiritual descendants of Christ.

In explaining this to the group, we can make good use of the notepaper we keep beside us as we talk. We can draw two columns, headed 'Adam' and 'Christ', and write down the pairs of contrasting words Paul uses as he explains what we are by nature and what we are through Christ. In this way people can see the alternatives. They must act in faith to accept Christ and his work if they are to have eternal life.

Human pride is a barrier to faith, because people like to think they have something to offer God that will win his favour. But good works can never earn salvation. The book of Romans keeps bringing us back to the basic truth that salvation is by grace through faith. Most people at some time object to this, arguing that it gives a licence to sin. Paul deals with this in Chapter 6, where he shows that Christians have an obligation *not* to sin. This does not mean they put themselves in bondage to lifeless regulations (Chapter 7); rather it means they allow the living Spirit of God within to reshape their lives (Chapter 8).

### **Trust in God's power**

Our working example has gone far enough. Its purpose is not to expound Romans, but to give an idea of how we can use the Bible in personal evangelism.

There is no formula for success, and people will not repent and believe merely because we have a Bible study with them. We do not underestimate the forces we are fighting against – not flesh and blood, but evil spiritual forces of the unseen world (Eph 6:12). At the same time we know that the weapons of our warfare have a divine power that can destroy strongholds (2 Cor 10:4). Any worthwhile work we do for God will involve physical sacrifice, but without the spiritual sacrifice of daily prayer we can spend a lot of time and effort fruitlessly. We cannot save anyone; only God can do that.

Nevertheless, we are the ones to whom God has committed the task of evangelism, and we need not hesitate to use the Bible

itself to explain salvation to the lost. The book of Acts recounts the story of an Ethiopian official who was not a Christian but was seeking the truth. When Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, the man replied, ‘How can I, unless someone explains it to me?’ (Acts 8:30-31). People are still searching for the truth, and we know that the truth they seek is found in the Bible. But, left to themselves, they are unlikely to read it, and if they do they are unlikely to understand it – unless someone explains it to them. And that is our job.

The Word of God is living and active, and can pierce into the innermost parts of a person’s being, where it convicts, judges, discerns and separates in a way that no human words can (Heb 4:12). But it can do this work only if the readers understand it. We who believe must therefore work out ways of explaining the Word as clearly and simply as possible, having confidence that it will then do its work in people’s hearts.

### **Further suggestions**

In many cases people will be happy to carry on the Bible study beyond the six weeks and finish the book of Romans. By this time they will have finished their reading of one of the Gospels, so we might then study the book of Acts. This carries on the narrative from the Gospels and gives people an insight into the growth and development of the early church. More importantly for evangelistic purposes, it shows the gospel in action. In the Gospels people have seen Jesus in his life, death and resurrection; in Romans they have seen how his work saves sinners and puts them right with God; and now in Acts they see people responding to the message of Jesus in repentance, faith, baptism and entrance into the church.

We shall find that some people take time to respond to the gospel, even though they might understand the Bible’s message. If they have made no commitment to Christ during our studies in Romans, they may be challenged afresh as we read Acts.

Having come this far in their Bible studies with us, people will no longer feel uneasy. We might therefore introduce them to other matters concerning Christianity if we have not done so

already. If they are agreeable, we can conclude each study session with a prayer, making sure we mention them and issues important to them. If they are not churchgoers, we might invite them to a church service or some other Christian function. We can also give them helpful Christian books on issues of interest to them (e.g. family, social concern, the environment).

On the matter of Christian books, those of us who lead Bible studies should also read widely. The more we read, the more confident we shall be in handling questions and discussions.

If we lack the confidence to conduct studies on Romans as outlined above, we can use published material that provides a framework in which to work more comfortably. Among the most suitable is *Christianity Explained*, a course on Mark's Gospel written by Michael Bennett and published by Scripture Union. Within a structure of six studies, people read through Mark and in the process look at six essentials of the gospel in logical sequence: (i) Jesus as the Son of God; (ii) Jesus' crucifixion; (iii) Jesus' resurrection; (iv) Salvation by grace, not by works; (v) Repentance and faith; (vi) Assurance.

When people respond to the gospel in repentance and faith, we should not think that is the end of our person-to-person Bible studies. We should go on to other New Testament books and then to key Old Testament books, so that the new believers know more of God and his Word. This will give them confidence, so that when they become part of other groups within the church, or when they hear teaching in the public meetings of the church, they will not feel lost or ignorant. Once a good foundation has been laid, they will soon build on it.

## Improving as we go

### **The use of spiritual gifts**

According to Paul, if God has given us spiritual gifts, the best way to develop them is to use them (Rom 12:6). However, we must use them in the right way. God gives us gifts not for our personal pleasure or satisfaction, but for the benefit and upbuilding of others. Gifts are given for the common good (1 Cor 12:7) and for the strengthening of the church (1 Cor 14:5,26). But where they are exercised in a spirit of jealousy or selfish ambition, there we shall find ‘disorder and every kind of evil practice’ (James 3:16). Without humility and love, the exercise of our spiritual gifts can be harmful.

Therefore, while we should eagerly desire to exercise spiritual gifts, we should even more eagerly desire to exercise love (1 Cor 14:1). Without love we are nothing. We might think our preaching sounds impressive, but in fact it might be no more useful than a noisy gong or a clanging bell (1 Cor 13:1). This does not give us an excuse to neglect the hard work of developing our gifts, but it does mean that we should work for a corresponding development in attitude and character.

### **Style and technique**

Our gifts differ according to the grace God has given us (Rom 12:6), but we all need to bring those gifts to maturity. We may have different preaching styles, but we all need to work at improving our preaching techniques.

Timothy had spiritual gifts that equipped him for the public preaching of the Word, and Paul reminded him to exercise those gifts (1 Tim 4:13-14). Certainly, Timothy had to pay the same attention to his personal life as he did to his public ministry if his work was to be effective (1 Tim 4:12,16), but he also had to devote himself to the practical development of his gifts. In fact, Paul encouraged him to do so with such diligence that others

would see his progress (1 Tim 4:15). Like Timothy, we should work constantly to improve the quality of our preaching, and as we make progress others will notice.

One way we can improve our preaching is to listen to tape recordings of ourselves. If this is not possible, we can at least take notice of comments from close friends or others in the audience. We must constantly be correcting our faults – speech that is too fast, too slow, too formal, too colloquial, poorly pronounced, toneless, sing-song, repetitive, or sprinkled with favourite expressions and preacher's jargon. We should continue to make periodic recordings even when we think we no longer need to, because we no sooner correct one bad habit than another appears.

If we can watch video recordings of our preaching we shall learn much that is beneficial; but many of us shall rarely, if ever, get such an opportunity. Again, however, we have friends who can be of assistance by their observations and suggestions. We should appreciate, rather than resent, any criticisms, because they can help us in our unending battle with bad habits such as fidgeting, swaying, awkwardness, ungainly gestures and distracting mannerisms. We should be careful on the one hand of the appearance of sternness, and on the other of the artificial grin. In communicating with the audience we must make eye-to-eye contact, but at the same time we must resist the tendency to look at only one section of the audience.

We can also learn by watching other preachers and observing what is desirable and what is not. But it is foolish merely to copy others, as the audience will soon notice if we are play-acting. In regard to our preaching style, the best advice a person can give us is 'Be yourself'. This does not mean that we should refuse to change bad habits or acquire better techniques; it means rather that our own personality should be the natural medium for our preaching style.

### **Thinking about words**

Earlier we mentioned the need to think about the words we use when preaching in church, so that we can eliminate those

words that are part of a widely practised church jargon but are not common in everyday speech (see Chapter 5). Concerning the teaching of non-Christians who do not attend church (see Chapter 13), we need to exercise even more care in the words we use. The failure of Christians to communicate in straightforward everyday language is one reason why non-Christians show little interest in the gospel.

When teaching non-Christians, we should, for example, use ‘letter’ rather than ‘epistle’ and ‘the Bible’ rather than ‘the Scriptures’. Neither ‘Bible’ nor ‘Scriptures’ is incorrect, but we should choose the word that anyone can understand rather than the word that only Christians understand.

Matters of theology may be difficult to explain, but as we think of simple ways to express ourselves we shall improve our own understanding. Careful thinking will help us be more precise. As much as possible we should be specific and uncomplicated, even in difficult matters such as those that relate to the Trinity. Most people are confused concerning the connection between ‘God’, ‘the Lord’, ‘Jehovah’, ‘Christ’, ‘Jesus’, ‘Holy Spirit’ and ‘Holy Ghost’. They are not sure whether these are the same or different. We should therefore think specifically about what we want to say and not use words that may have several meanings. For instance, rather than use ‘the Lord’, we should say ‘Jesus’ if we mean Jesus, and ‘God’ if we mean God. Once people become Christians, we can explain the issues to them more fully.

With practice we shall develop a non-technical vocabulary and a matter-of-fact way of expressing ourselves. We shall find easier ways to explain things and build a collection of useful examples, illustrations and analogies. If we have the attitude of learners, we shall become increasingly aware of the sorts of things we should or should not say.

When preaching in church we may not feel as restricted in our style of speaking as when teaching a non-Christian group, but we must be careful not to slip back into old habits. We should always be examining our words to see that they have the

same meaning for the hearers as they have for us. One way to do this is to imagine some non-Christian friends in the congregation and ask ourselves whether they would understand what we are saying.

### **The person and the message**

Apart from being careful in the correct choice of words when teaching, we must be careful of our speech and behaviour in general. God's servants are to have 'sound speech that cannot be condemned' (Titus 2:8; cf. Col 4:6) and are to be blameless in their public and private lives (Titus 1:6-7; cf. Phil 2:15). The way we live must be consistent with what we teach.

This requires constant alertness and discipline, because one obvious fault can cause our hearers to ignore whatever we say. It will also bring an adverse judgment from God. James tells us that those who teach will be judged with greater strictness than others (James 3:1), and Paul tells us that if we judge others but do the things they do, we condemn ourselves (Rom 2:1).

Although we should take these warnings seriously, we should not, out of cowardice or fear, avoid the responsibility God has entrusted to us. We are answerable to him for the way we respond to this trust, and therefore we must work at our job honestly and diligently (1 Cor 4:1-2). At the same time we must have an attitude of prayerful reliance on God, as if everything depended on him alone. We want people to be attracted to God and his Word, not to us or our style. Our preaching and teaching should be dependent on the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, so that people's faith rests not on human accomplishments but on God's power (1 Cor 2:4-5).

### **The final test**

Through a combination of hard work and prayer, our ministry should become more useful to God and more beneficial to our hearers. We may strive for practical improvements in our preaching style and techniques, but above all we should aim at building people up in the knowledge of God and his Word. Our teaching should be both instructive and pastoral.

In view of this, the content of the sermon should always be our main consideration. With good content, well presented, we should have no difficulty holding the audience's attention for thirty minutes or longer. A poor sermon will seem too long even if it lasts only ten minutes.

The test of a good sermon is not the praise it wins from people as they leave at the end of the service, but the results it produces in people's lives. Our exposition of the Bible fulfils one of its main purposes when those who hear it are reconciled to God and changed into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Our aim is not to make people dependent on us or our preaching, but to teach them how to feed upon the Word of God. We should want them to go home from church determined to do what the Bible says and enthused to look at it afresh for themselves. When they begin to do this, we shall feel the sort of satisfaction that John the Baptist felt when people no longer followed him but followed Jesus. The Word must increase, but we must decrease (John 3:26-30).

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