

The Gospel and Scripture: How to Read the Bible

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The Gospel and Scripture: How to Read the Bible

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Christians intuitively agree that there is a necessary and deeply interpenetrating relationship between Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The exact nature of that relationship is a more challenging matter. While many lines of connection could be (and have been) productively explored, this chapter suggests and unpacks two particular connections between Scripture and the gospel: the gospel is a *cause* of scriptural revelation, and the gospel is an *effect* of scriptural revelation. In other words, God's great, eternal purpose of redemption (what is expressed in the gospel) gives rise to the Bible, and the Bible serves to accomplish God's purpose in the gospel.

The Gospel as Both Cause and Effect of Scriptural Revelation

Cause

If we think of the gospel, broadly speaking, as God's eternal good purpose to redeem a people for himself (1 Pet. 2:9) and to restore his fallen creation (Rom. 8:19–21), then this “good news” precedes and gives rise to biblical revelation. All of Scripture is marked by this sense of being born out of some great divine initiative. In this sense, the gospel is a cause of biblical revelation. While Scripture itself is not the gospel, all Scripture is related to the gospel, and the gospel is Scripture's reason for being. The gospel is the Bible's main and unifying message.

God's purposes in revelation can never be separated from his purposes in redemption. In eternity past God planned to redeem a people for himself:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according

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to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph. 1:3–6)

God's plan lies behind and brings into being his spoken communication to humans, which is preserved in Scripture.

Inherent in the idea of revelation is the idea of intention. God means to accomplish something by revealing himself:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10–11)

God sends his word to accomplish his eternal purpose to redeem a people for himself, and God speaks through Isaiah of gathering a people to himself:

Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you. (Isa. 55:3–5)

The New Testament frequently spells out this purpose of revelation with great clarity. Paul writes of the Old Testament, "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Hope of what? Hope of the full redemption that the completion of God's good purposes will bring about (cf. Rom. 8:18–25). This, says Paul, is why God wrote the Scriptures. Scripture is essential to reveal God's redeeming purpose and activity. In this sense,

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the gospel is the cause of Scripture. But the gospel, in at least one crucial sense, is also an effect of biblical revelation.

Effect

We speak of the gospel in the sense of its effective proclamation. In this sense revelation necessarily precedes the gospel, and the gospel flows effectively from scriptural revelation. The gospel is the Bible's main message, and preaching the content of the Bible—that is, the prophetic anticipation of God's redemptive purpose in Christ from the Old Testament and the apostolic witness to the accomplished work of Christ in the New Testament—unleashes the power of the gospel message and achieves its God-ordained end.

Paul captures this so compellingly in Romans 10. Speaking of God's purpose to redeem a people for himself, he writes:

There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? . . . And how are they to hear to hear without someone preaching? (Rom. 10:12–14)

A few verses later, Paul makes this summarizing statement: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (v. 17). In other words, Scripture faithfully proclaimed accomplishes God's good purpose to redeem.

Peter makes the same point: "You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. . . . And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:23–25). John echoes this theme when he says that he wrote his Gospel "so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). This is simply another way of saying that biblical revelation exists to accomplish God's great purpose to redeem a people for himself in Christ.

So the Bible exists both *because of* and *for* the gospel. The key is that the gospel is the message of Christ. The Bible in all its parts points to and explains Christ in some way. Therefore, the Bible in all its parts contributes not only to our understanding the gospel but to our "hear-

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ing” the gospel with the goal that we might believe and that God will fully accomplish his good purpose of redemption. This then requires that we appropriate Scripture in keeping with God’s good purpose.

Foundational Convictions Necessary for a Right Reading of Scripture

If the Bible is going to exercise the particular effectiveness that God intends, certain foundational convictions need to be in place and functioning.

Scripture Is God-Breathed

Paul reminds his dear son in the faith, “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). Paul is saying that Scripture originates in the mind of God and is spoken out (“breathed out”) from that mind. That God really spoke Scripture is a conviction that Christians must hold deeply so that their lives are shaped by it. When we use the phrase “God’s Word” to refer to our Bibles, we shouldn’t miss what that term communicates. God has spoken something objective. There is something specific *he* is saying. He is speaking. He is communicating. God has really spoken, and the Scripture is that word in written form.

The primary implication of this conviction is that the Bible is trustworthy and true. “Every word of God proves true” (Prov. 30:5). Holding to this conviction will profoundly impact both our personal reading of the Bible and our response to it. It will set us free from always questioning and wondering. Conversely, if we do not hold this conviction, we will find ourselves second-guessing, double-minded, and unstable when we face difficulties in life or in the Bible.

Scripture Is Understandable

Paul tells Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). There is such a thing as rightly handling God’s Word. In other words, not only has God said something objective and specific, but he also means for us to get it. God is not some cruel deity toying with us in revelation. He did not say something that he knows we will never understand, like some uncrackable code. He did not give us a communication designed to frustrate. No, he spoke for a purpose. The very concept of *revelation* indicates an intention to