

Reading Scripture with Grace-Filled Eyes: Part III

Recognizing Christ in Scripture

By Ben Pereira

In the second century A.D., a man named Marcion made theological waves. He viewed the stories of God in the Old Testament to be incompatible with Jesus in the New Testament. Marcion taught that the “god” of the Old Testament was a separate, lesser god than the one presented in the New. This removed his theological tension, and any book, chapter, or verse that challenged his perspective was simply thrown out.

Clearly, the difficulty balancing tension-filled passages of Scripture is nothing new. Although most modern Christians do not follow Marcion's blatant heresy by removing passages out of their Bibles, many of us may neglect or de-emphasize certain ones that prove difficult to understand in light of the New Covenant. How do we honor the Old Testament and the numerous commands found in the New, while keeping the context of grace in the Gospel?

It's helpful to remember that for the first twenty years, the early church had no written New Testament books. At that time, a large amount of New Covenant teaching was done from the Old Testament. The apostles saw the New Covenant as the Messianic fulfillment that the Old Covenant was pointing to. The New Testament is replete with Old Testament quotations interpreted in light of the New Covenant. (1 Tim. 1:7-8)

When approaching Scripture, it is vital to understand our place in God's redemptive story. Because Christ has come and ushered in the New Covenant, our interpretation of Scripture must match that. Dr. Stephen Wellum, a theology professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, underscores this point, stating:

“As with any biblical text, however, before we directly apply it [the Old Testament] to our lives, we must first place it in its covenantal location; *and* then second, we must think

through how that text points forward, anticipates, and is fulfilled in Christ...In fact, apart from following this hermeneutical process, we will incorrectly apply Scripture.”¹

Christ must be the filter by which we interpret all Scripture. Jesus, himself, took this approach:

“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”² (Luke 24:27)

Studying the Bible isn’t merely understanding a *process*, it’s about understanding a *Person*.

The author of Hebrews uses this approach as he describes Christ as the fulfillment and application of the Sabbath day of rest (Heb. 4:3-9). In the New Covenant, we relate to the Sabbath command through Christ who is our true rest. In Him, we rest from *all* our works. God’s intent for that command wasn’t merely resting one day of the week but learning to rest *in Him* every day. The author of Hebrews took this Old Testament principle and applied it in light of Christ’s work and our place in God’s redemptive plan.

Likewise, when we approach ethical passages that focus on our behavior, we also read those through Jesus. For example, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus actually raised the standard of sexual ethics by stating that those who lust after someone are actually committing adultery in their heart (Matt. 5:27-28). God’s intent was never about just abstaining from physical adultery. His intent is that we love and serve him and honor others around us. Because we relate to God’s command through Christ’s righteousness rather than legalism, sexual integrity ceases to be a puritanical obligation. Sexual integrity becomes an expression of the reality that we no longer need to use people and temporary pleasure to meet our soul’s deepest needs. It’s in Christ, not other people, that we discover unconditional joy, contentment, and acceptance. This

¹ Wellum, S. J., & Parker, B. E. (2016). *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course Between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic. pg. 222.

² See also John 5:39-40

reality right-sizes our sexuality. It's not something to be suppressed or ignored, but also not something that dominates and defines our identity.

Observing and learning ethical principles in Scripture is not irrelevant or outdated; instead, we apply them to our lives through Christ. His power provides a change in lifestyle that matches the identity He has given to us by grace. 2 Peter 1:3 tells us:

“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life *through our knowledge of him* who called us by his own glory and goodness.” [emphasis mine]

In light of this truth, **we open Scripture to encounter and interact with God, not just outward standards of “Christian” behavior.**

Concluding Thoughts

As I mentioned in the first article in this series, fourth grade was indeed a difficult year. As I started fifth grade, anxiety remained. Would it be more of the same terrible experiences? Much to my surprise, I found nothing threatening about this new teacher. She took time to develop a relationship with us, read us books, and related on our level. There were still boundaries and standards in the classroom, but they were based in care and relationship, not fear. Gradually, I found myself *enjoying* the idea of going to class and learning. It became fun. Life in the classroom began to grow as misbehaving kids became more attentive and timid kids came out of their shell. These drastically different teaching styles are a small example of the power of grace over fear. I still remember these childhood experiences and emotions into my thirties!

Paul also used a school-related metaphor to convey God's redemptive plan in Galatians 3:25-29. He compares the Covenant of Law to a guardian or teacher that was present with humanity until the fullness of God's redemption arrived in Jesus. In Him, we no longer need to relate to the guardian. We now can relate to God directly as “Abba!” or daddy. This change of relationship is the beauty of what it means to live in the New Covenant. You are accepted and

loved. God is now working in and through you to live out that identity in your day-to-day life. In the final stanza of one of my favorite poems “Love Constraining to Obedience,” William Cowper summarizes it elegantly:

To see the law by Christ fulfilled

And hear His pardoning voice,

Changes a slave into a child,

And duty into choice.

Below are a few questions that you can ask yourself or discuss with a friend to process how you can begin seeing Christ in Scripture:

Question #1: Read Leviticus 16:3-10. Now, read Hebrews 9:11-15. How does the author of Hebrews interpret the Old Covenant in light of Christ?

Question #2: How does Christ’s work in Hebrews 9:11-15 speak into your confidence in interacting with God? In verse 15, what is the reason “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant?”