

Chapter 7 – Applying the Story

Application is vital. If there is no answer to the, “So what?” question, then, at best, we’re just providing interest or amusement. As preachers we rightly want to find concrete applications for our hearers. We want our hearers to be growing in godliness and holiness.

And our hearers really want to hear application too. When you move into application mode and say, “So what does this mean in practice for us?” you often see people leaning forward, on the edge of their seats, waiting to hear what this really means for them.

So application is vital, but it is also where it can easily all go very wrong. Maybe I’ve seen the Big Point of the passage quite clearly but when it comes to application I don’t really know how to apply. I want to give my congregation something to take away, some comfort, some hope, something to do, but I’m not sure I can get that from the passage so I leave the text behind and go off in a rather different direction.

APPLICATION WE DON’T WANT

- a) Random – These are the common applications bolted on to any sermon when we can’t think of anything else: Trust God, pray more, read the Bible more, witness more, give more, recommit your life to Christ... Instead of these we need application that flows naturally from the text.
- b) Superficial – This means seeing something that looks like a promise or command or warning and jumping on it and applying it to us.
- c) Allegorising – Treating history as if it is parable – e.g. in Exodus 14 the Red Sea is taken to represent all our impossible challenges in life or the Egyptians represent all our enemies; or similarly in 1 Samuel 17 Goliath is our life problems and the stones are the Word of God or faith or spiritual disciplines. This might seem harmless but you can see how dangerous this sort of allegorising is when you look at what liberal

scholars do with the New Testament narratives – miracles are no longer historical accounts they are mythical stories with a spiritual meaning; Jesus didn't physically rise from the dead (they say), the resurrection story is just a story about new life and Jesus living on in our hearts.

- d) Personalising – Jumping into the shoes of the Bible characters – e.g. in Exodus 3 we are Moses and the chapter becomes a pattern for how we manage our mid-life crisis or prepare for a new challenge, or in 1 Samuel 17 we become David (strangely we never see ourselves as Goliath, despite the fact that most of us are Gentiles and we are naturally enemies of God).
- e) Moralising – This is the great curse of our pulpits. We see something bad in the story and we say, “Don't do that” and we see something good and we say, “Do that”. But when you read through Genesis (and the whole OT) you find you simply can't do that. We find that all our 'heroes' are deeply fallen sinners and that often God blesses the bad guys in the story and works out his purposes through a whole mess of sin and evil. Even when we do a good job of handling the text and realise this theme of sovereign grace, moralism still lurks and there is a great danger that in our move to application we move from grace to works: e.g. Big Point of my sermon = “God Saves”; Application = “Now we need to do our bit”. The gospel drops away and our application is simple moralism.
- f) Principlising – This is trying to find a 'value' or a 'principle' in the story to apply – e.g. from Genesis 11 we find the value of unity – “Nothing will be impossible for them” – forgetting that, in the context, this is an *evil* unity. The Bible doesn't really give us principles (stripped of context and disconnected from Christ) – it gives us stories.

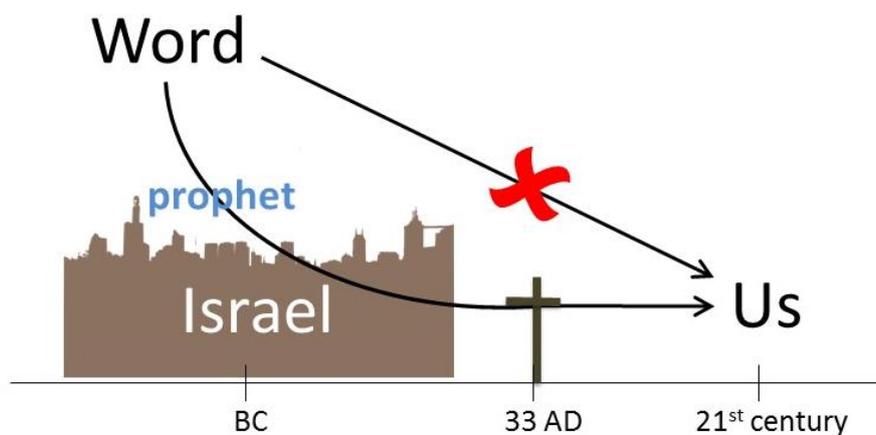
SLOW DOWN AND GO BACK

As we say in Kiswahili, *Pole pole ndio mwendo*. Slowly does it. Don't rush to the superficial application. Don't grab at anything that looks like an application. Don't rush to jump into the shoes of the Bible characters.

- a) History not parable – Most of the problems come from forgetting that these are *real people* living in *real places* to whom these things *really happened* in a past time. The Red Sea really was a sea – it is not 'my problems'. Abraham, Moses,

David were real men. They are not me. Israel three thousand years ago is not Kenya or the UK today. These are not parables or allegories or How-To's for us to copy. This is the honest, unvarnished account of sinners interacting with one another and with God.

- b) The Scriptures are written *for* us (Romans 15:4; 1 Peter 1:12) but not *to* us. It was first addressed to others. God teaches us through what he did in history. The Word is first to them, then, through listening to what was said to them in their context, we hear God's word for us. In our arrogance we demand a personal message from God but actually God has given us something far richer and more wonderful – a story of his interaction with his people over thousands of years – a beautiful tapestry where all the threads weave together to give us a multi-coloured, multi-layered, multi-textured image of Christ.



- c) The context gives the cutting edge. It is as we take the time to go back to Canaan 3000 years ago and take time to find exactly what the Word meant to them then – *that* is where we find the cutting edge for our message – how it should apply to us.

THE GODS OF CANAAN

For example, when you go back into the Old Testament world and see that the real struggle throughout the time of the Kings about who is the real God (e.g. 1 Kings 18:21) – you find a very sharp

cutting edge both then and now. Just take a quick look at the gods of those days:

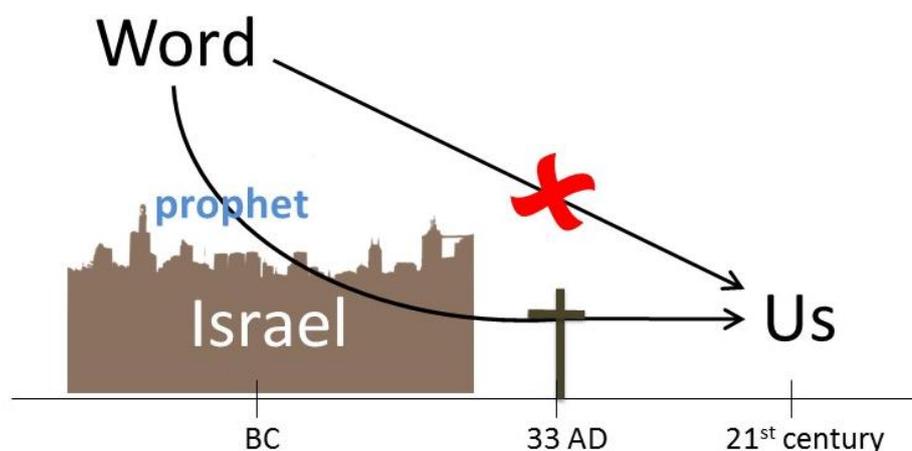
- Baal – Prosperity & Power
- Asherah & Ashtoreth – Sex
- Nebo – Education
- Golden Calves – Yahweh domesticated
- High places – ‘Anything goes’ religion
- Chemosh – A god who must be cajoled with desperate sacrifices
- Molech/Milcom – Sacrifice your children



It doesn't take you long to realise how incredibly relevant these idolatries and temptations and false ideas of God are in our context today.

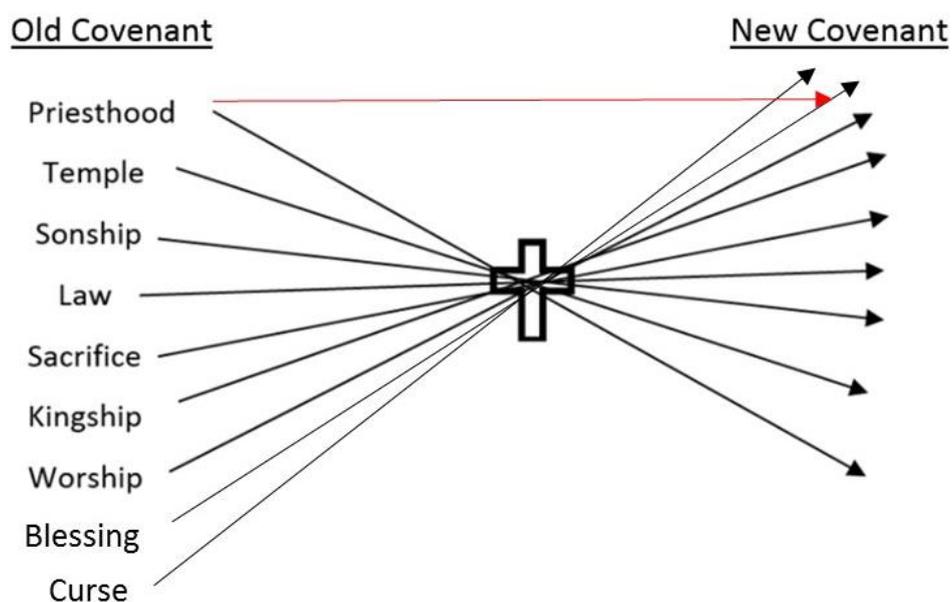
REMEMBER WHERE YOU ARE IN THE BIG STORY

As we saw in the last chapter, the whole story of the Bible is the story of Christ, centred on the Cross. As the diagram indicates, we must hear the word of God first as the word spoken to the ancient Israelites and then we must see how it goes through the Cross.



DON'T JUMP OVER THE CROSS

We must never start to apply the Old Testament without taking into account the Cross. As someone has put it, we should look at the Old Testament through cross-shaped glasses – glasses given to us by Jesus (Luke 24:44-46). In particular we must make sure we take various concepts and institutions of the Old Testament through the Cross.



You can see in this diagram how all the patterns of the Old Covenant come together in Christ crucified. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law of Moses (Matthew 5:17; John 5:46; Romans 10:4). He is the great prophet, priest and king. The ultimate sacrifice. But also notice that the lines of the diagram continue out the other side of the Cross. For example, Israel was God's son (Exodus 4:22), Jesus is the ultimate and unique Son of God, but we who are in Christ are also called sons of God (1 John 3:1). In the Old Testament there were various 'anointed ones', Jesus is the Great Anointed One (Christ/Messiah), and then on the other side of the Cross, in the church age, all those with the Spirit of Christ are anointed (1 John 2:20). Similarly with the Temple – we see it fulfilled in Christ (John 2:21) and now in the NT we the church are God's living breathing Temple (1 Cor. 3:17; Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:5).

The danger comes when we take things over from one side to the other without passing through the Cross (the red line in the diagram). For example we might equate OT priests with NT pastors or the Temple with our church buildings or OT offerings with NT offerings. The whole Law – all its offices and structures and stipulations – moral and ceremonial – all of it needs to be taken through the Cross rather than applied today as if we are still under the Old Covenant.

BLESSINGS AND CURSES

A particularly important theme to take through the Cross is the whole issue of blessings and curses. We saw it in Genesis 12 and it is comes in a very full and expanded form in Deuteronomy 28 (and Leviticus 26). It might be tempting to apply these passages directly to us as if like Abraham we will be blessed with children, camels, gold but Galatians 3 insists that we see both Genesis 12 and Deuteronomy 28 through the Cross of Christ where He became a curse for us so that we could have the blessing of justification and Sonship. In Christ we are safe from all the curse of the Law and from the far worse final curse of the lake of fire. In Christ we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm – not children, camels and gold but something far better.

HOW TO APPLY (IN A NUTSHELL): 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17

As we talk about Christ and ‘taking things through the Cross’ we’re starting to get to the real essence of application. Let’s hear the Apostle Paul explain what the Scriptures are for:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through

faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

The big aim of all the Scriptures is to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. So the Big Point of every story will have something to do with Jesus. And when it comes to application of Scripture *we must apply the big point*. So if the Big Point will always have something to do with Jesus the right application will be to *apply Him* to the souls of sinners for their salvation.

The great danger in application is that we can do a good job of getting to the heart of the story and then our application goes off in a different direction. What we need to do is find the Big Point of the story and apply *that big point* – or to put it another way – we want to find Christ in the text and apply Him. As a nurse applies a healing lotion to a wound, so we are to apply Christ to the wounded souls of sinners.

Application is not ‘making the Bible relevant’. The Bible is always already relevant! Every passage is completely relevant *because it is about Christ* and he is the one that every human being must reckon with, the one who (re)defines everything, the one that every one on the face of the earth desperately needs, the one who is the only hope for sinners under the wrath of God, the one who is the deepest answer to this and every other problem, the one whom to know more and more *is* the Christian life, our righteousness, sanctification, wisdom and joy.

EXAMPLE: EXODUS 3

This is a passage we can very easily make all about us but, if we stop to think, it is very obviously all about God. In fact it is one of the most

important revelations of God in the whole Bible. Christ is all over this story:

- *Problem* – The cries of the oppressed call out for the serpent crusher. The holiness of the place reminds us of Eden (the last time the word was used previous to this) and the problem of being excluded from God's place.
- *Presence* – Jesus is the Angel of the LORD in the bush – the God of the patriarchs, the LORD himself who has “come down” (Ex. 3:8), the great “I AM” (cf. John 8:58), the one who delivers God's people (Jude 5). This is not just a revelation of ‘God’ but a revelation specifically of Christ.
- *Pattern* – Moses is a type of Christ – the deliverer prince (Acts 7:35), the man born of woman who will rescue God's people.
- *Promise* – The promise of deliverance, of freedom serving God, of a restored land of plenty and rest, is only fully accomplished by Christ coming in the flesh, bringing about the Greater Passover at his death, rising and ascending to prepare a place for us.

So there is almost too much of Christ to preach in this passage! What we need to do as we come to apply Exodus 3 is to apply *this salvation in Christ*. Our main line of application will not be about “Me as Moses” it will be about how our lives and eternities are transformed by the fact that Jesus, the great I AM, has come down for our salvation.

HEART, HEAD, HANDS

But how exactly do we apply Christ? Well it may be helpful to consider three areas we are aiming at:

- Heart – This is where it all starts. The “wellspring of life” (Prov. 4:23). The Word is sown into the heart (Matt. 13:19). And it is the calloused heart which is the root problem – the root of all our wrong thinking and wrong living (Matt. 13:15; Eph. 4:17-19 cf. 1 Kings 11:1-10). It was a heart issue in the garden of Eden when the serpent seduced Eve away from a pure devotion to Christ by the lie that “God is not good” and the promise of another joy apart from Christ (Gen. 3:5-6; 2 Cor. 11:3). From then on, as John Owen put it, “The great contest of heaven and earth is about the affections of the poor worm which we call man.” Satan is

seeking to take hearts away from Christ to treasure other things, God is turning hearts back to himself (1 Kings 18:37). It is into this battle that the Scriptures come as the great means by which God will turn hearts back to him, or as 2 Timothy 3:15 puts it, “make you wise”. The aim is a wisdom that trusts in the LORD with all the heart (Prov. 3:5), that rejoices in what is truly valuable and grasps hold of what is better than silver and gold (Prov. 3:13-15; 4:5-9). So as we preach from the Bible we preach to win hearts, to make them truly wise; so that people see Christ as he is and are drawn to his glorious beauty. Sometimes the primary application of a Bible passage will not be “Do” so much as simply, “Behold your God!”

- Head – When Paul goes into detail on how the Scriptures make us wise for salvation (2 Timothy 3:16) he speaks of “teaching” and “reproof” – both of which are mainly to do with our thinking and understanding. The Christian life is not just about emotions. It is about truth. We need to unlearn the lies of the Serpent. We need to know the true God. We need to “learn Christ” (Eph. 4:20). The Old Testament Scriptures are there to teach us the truth, the “doctrine of God our Saviour” which leads to godliness (Titus 1:1; 2:10). They are there to reprove false teaching and replace it with true gospel faith and gospel living (Titus 1:13; 2:14-15). So the application of a Bible narrative may well be that we need to *think* about God differently – to change our theology from an idea of God as a hard-to-please big-boss-in-the-sky to a personal, ground-level God of compassion and sacrifice (e.g. Exodus 3 or 1 Kings 18:20-29). Often the application will be not so much “Do” as “Think rightly”; “Consider Christ.”
- Hands – There is also a place – a very important place – for application to the hands, the behaviour, daily living. 2 Timothy 3:16 continues by speaking of “correction” and “training in righteousness” – both of which speak mainly of behaviour and practice. We should not ignore the many imperatives (“Do this”, “Flee from this”) in the Bible. We should not shy away from the Bible’s very practical instructions and implications about, for example, sexual immorality, corruption, parenting, status, tradition, marriage and singleness. The Scriptures are given that we would “Do them” (Deut. 29:29; Matt. 28:20; Luke 6:46-49; James 1:22). They are to correct (straighten out) our crooked lives and to train God’s people how to walk in the path of godliness. But notice it is the Bible-which-is-all-about-salvation-through-faith-in-Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15) that trains people to walk rightly. We are not simply to hit people over the head with commands. It is the grace of God which trains us to say No to

ungodliness (Titus 2:11-12). We need to show people a) that they have failed to do what God requires (hence the need for Christ's life and death for us); b) that the truth and shape of the gospel of Christ itself demands that we now live in a particular way (e.g. Ephesians 4:32-5:2; 5:25); and c) that we can only live in this way by the Spirit of Christ.

So, in a nutshell – read your Bible passage carefully, find the Big Point about Christ, and apply *Him*. Let our preaching be holding out Christ to sinners, the bread of life to hungry souls. As John Wesley and George Whitefield used to put in their diaries: “Preached at such and such a place... offered them Christ.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK AS WE APPLY

These seven questions may help us as we work through our preparation from the Big Point to the Application:

- What was the Big Point of the story? This is what we're going to want to apply. To find the Big Point we'll need to do lots of work reading and reading and reading the text, looking for the surprises, the turning point, the key statements, the repeated phrases and ideas.
- Where did you see Christ in this story? In Old Testament narratives the Problem-Promise-Pattern-Presence grid may be helpful. If the whole Bible is about him then he should be in the Big Point of the passage somehow. He is the one we want to apply.
- Where is this story in the big story of the Bible? How does the life, death and resurrection of Jesus make sense of this story and direct us to the right application? What are the concepts or structures or patterns that we will need to 'take through the Cross'? How is the application going to be different in the New Testament era?
- How does this story lead us to salvation in Christ Jesus? What aspect of our salvation does it bring out most powerfully? E.g. Exodus 14 particularly brings out most clearly the aspect of us being inactive in our salvation and Christ fighting for us.
- How does this address our hearts? How should this story and this picture of Christ and his work move our emotions? How should it move us from devotion to the world to joy in Christ?

- How does this address our heads? What gospel doctrine are we being taught here? What are the false ideas of about Christ and the Christian life that this story destroys?
- How does this correct and train our hands? Did the author of this story want us to do something or avoid something in response? Are there natural implications of this teaching for our lives? How does this all connect to the gospel? Make sure you are very clear at this point why the gospel is the reason and means of doing these things.

Then three questions to help us apply to different people:

- How does this apply to me - the preacher - as a sinner? My most common temptation in reading the Bible is that I'm far too quickly thinking of how I might preach it; I'm already thinking of a congregation or a context and I'm already thinking, 'What do *they* need to hear, what comfort or challenge do *they* need?' I'm very ashamed that I've often bypassed my own heart and not swallowed and digested and felt the effect of God's Word on me first. We must be like Ezra and do before teaching (Ezra 7:10). And we must apply to ourselves as sinners. Let us not be like the Pharisees who thought themselves righteous and looked down on those they put in a different category to themselves but rather, let us be those who know how sinful we are and love Jesus much because we know we have been forgiven much (Luke 7:47). As we read the Scriptures let's soak in the grace of God ourselves and enjoy Christ ourselves before we then seek to apply Him to others.
- How does this apply to the church? We very easily personalise the Bible – treating it as if it is a devotional book written for individuals. Actually the Bible is for the Church corporately – think of the reading of the Law to everyone in Exodus 24 or Nehemiah 8 or the words of the Prophets which were almost always to the people as a whole. In the NT the letters were to be read out to the church as a whole (e.g. 1 Thess. 1:27) – men and women, children and parents, slaves and masters. So instead of thinking, 'How can I give each individual a 'take home' application?' we should rather think, 'What is this passage saying to our church family?' and then 'What is this saying to particular groups in the church family – mature, immature, proud, discouraged, married, unmarried, working, unemployed?' While there will be a big thing that passage is saying to everyone the applications will often be quite different for different people. The Scriptures should comfort the afflicted and afflict the

comfortable. One of the wonderful things about the Hebrew narratives is that they are so beautifully cleverly told that there are very often different levels of meaning of different characters and different parts of the plot (and subplots) that lend themselves to making a range of different applications.

- How does this apply to the world? There will almost always be unbelievers in a Christian gathering – visitors, enquirers or nominal believers. The Bible is public truth. It is not just for a holy huddle – it is truth for the whole world. A story like Genesis 3 tells us truths about humanity and about Christ that are vital for everyone to hear. A story like the Flood or the Parting of the Red Sea is a great comfort for those in Christ but also a massive warning to those outside him of judgment on the world outside of Christ. Above all we must never assume that people are born again and we must never assume that people have heard the gospel so take every opportunity to hold out Christ as the saviour of sinners.

A QUICK WORKED EXAMPLE: 2 KINGS 5

The Big Point of this wonderful story is the grace of God and particularly its broadness (extending even to a Gentile enemy), its narrowness (it comes only at the Jordan, only through the LORD's prophet, only according to his directions), and its freeness (no works are to be done, no payment to be taken). All of these dimensions are very clearly true of the gospel of Christ Jesus.

When it comes to applying the main point we might helpfully look at the different characters involved.

- Naaman – There is a clear line of application here in that most of us are Gentiles like him and naturally enemies of God, the most unlikely candidates for grace. We could particularly observe and apply his struggle to accept the narrowness of God's grace and then how, in finally submitting to the simple call he is transformed, not only through the curing of the leprosy (which is a sign in the Bible of curse, uncleanness, exclusion and death (Numbers 12:12)) but also in a new softness of heart (2 Kings 5:18).

- The Israelite girl – She is an unexpected preacher of good news to the Gentiles. It seems that she must have taught of God’s grace as a small child and absorbed it to such an extent that, amazingly, despite being kidnapped and taken hundreds of miles from home, she is not bitter at God and her captor but actually wants him to know God’s grace. Lots of application there to Christian parents and children and those who have experienced abuse.
- The King of Israel – Despite his status he has only a couple of lines in the story which simply show that he does not instinctively go to God/Elisha when he is faced with impossible demands. Application here to nominal Christians and those tempted to pride and self-sufficiency.
- Gehazi – He is clearly a warning to those within God’s people of the great evil of obscuring the freeness of the grace of God through accepting money in payment (cf. Acts 8:20; 2 Cor. 2:17; 1 Thess. 2:5; 1 Timothy 6:5). Shockingly, the uncleanness and curse of leprosy that was on the Gentile ends up on the Israelite.

As we make different applications we must keep in focus the Big Point of the grace of God and keep in mind that the main impact this story was supposed to have on its first hearers (and on its later hearers) is shock (Luke 4:27-28) – the scandal of God’s grace going out *not* to those who felt entitled to it (like the king of Israel and many others in Israel at that time) but to the *Gentiles*, the outcasts, the enemies.

So, as we conclude this chapter, the key thought is this: *We apply the big point. And the big point is the good news of Christ. So we apply Christ crucified.* Next we turn to how we can communicate the message as effectively as possible.