

# Seven great biblical themes God impressed on my heart (over the last 15 years of preaching)

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**Introduction:** It wasn't easy hearing what God would have me say today in this final sermon to IBC. But what came to the surface was simply the many things God has been impressing on my heart over these years of preaching at IBC. So it may feel this morning as though I'm trying to sum up everything I've been saying for the past 15 years! But I'll do my best to give you the abbreviated version!

**1)** From early childhood, I have been deeply **impressed by God's creation**, which He always intended as His first vehicle of communication and revelation (known as "general revelation"). This is God's world! He's the Owner, Designer, Author and Finisher, and His creation tells us so much about Him.

- Think about what kind of Artist could create all that we see and so much more that we cannot see (from dark matter out in space to the dark corners of our inner space!). "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). **All of creation points beyond itself to the Artist.** It all bears His fingerprints! The Bible says that only a fool would say that such order and exquisite beauty is merely the result of chance (Ps. 14:1). So we need to pay closer attention to creation, as modern inventors are doing, following nature's designs to improve aircraft, camera lenses, ship and train design, etc. (biomimetics)!

- Would not such an Artist be **interested in and capable of making Himself known**? Of course He is! And is not such a Creator-King the most able to diagnose our problems and provide solutions? Of course he is! I could spend hours just watching plants grow, meditating on how they assimilate water and nutrients from the soil, thinking about how it's a similar process to what takes place in our gut, and also to what takes place in our soul, depending on what we're "feeding" our mind: hopefully, God's Word!

**2) The second great impression on my soul** has come from **God's Word**, His second way of making Himself known, but His primary way, because in His Word it's no longer a matter of inferring what the Artist is like from His artwork, but it's a personal communication, especially beginning with a single individual and his family (Abraham), growing a nation little by little, taking them through the trials of life and forging their character through suffering and sacrifice, teaching them who He is and who they were called to be, practicing with them, patiently making Himself known in the history of that people as their Redeemer/Liberator, and leaving a written record for those who would come afterward.

- So God's Word itself began to grow among us: from the ancient stories of our race and God's role as the Author of all our beginnings, to the history of Abraham's family, then the law, the early history of the Israelites in Canaan, the kings and the sacred literature that began to be added, followed by the prophets, and finally the new covenant.

- Then we have the Word's own description of how it functions in our lives, from Jeremiah's vision of the Word as fire and hammer (Jer. 23:29); to Jesus' interpretation of the Word as seed to be sown (Mk. 4:14); Paul's view of it as the sword of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 6:17); and James' comparing it to a mirror (Jas. 1:23). The Word is how we get to know Him, how we learn to hear His voice. This is why it's so important for you to be a student of the Word! Get involved in personal and group Bible study so that you can stand firm in the difficult issues of the days ahead.

**3) The third deep impression on my soul comes from God's Word made flesh – His incarnation –** which was, of course, the climax of His revelation: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14) was a truth that gripped my soul for the first time almost 50 years ago, and I still haven't finished coming to grips with it.

- The incarnation is a well so deep that we never finish plumbing its depths, and it will never run dry for the watering of our souls! I could spend every sermon talking about it, because it means He came and lived in a house like mine! He showed such solidarity with us: He is with us, for us, in us!

- According to Paul in Philippians 2, the **Lord** of the universe became a **servant**, and according to Heb. 2, the Author of salvation would share flesh and blood like the rest of humanity. How ironic that **the Word** had to become "**material**" so that we could overcome the pitfalls of **materialism**! The Word was **made flesh** so that we wouldn't have to live under the **domination of our flesh**! The Word had to **materialize** so the **immaterial God** would **matter** to us more than **matter**. The Word wore "dust of the earth" so we wouldn't get stuck in the mud!

- If our God has actually come to us in this way, then we'd better pay attention to His verdict, His diagnosis, His solution! Among Moses' final words to the Israelites, in Deut. 32 we see him urging them regarding God's law: "take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you; they're **not just idle words for you – they are your life!**" How much more so then must we pay attention to the Word incarnate: what He says is a matter of life and death!

**4) His diagnosis** of our problem is the fourth thing that God has deeply impressed on my soul. Jesus gave that diagnosis in many ways, for example, describing man's heart as the source of every evil and the real reason behind our corruption and uncleanness.

- Also Jesus' summary of the law identifying the greatest commandment points out where we tend to fail first and foremost: loving God with our whole being. This means that idolatry (false worship, failing to love God first) is always our default mode, because we simply put something else in His place, with the result that we don't fulfill the second law either: loving neighbor as ourselves.

- This means we can't afford to get stuck on symptoms, treating them as if they were the root problem! For example, we think one of our biggest problems is our **inability to control our appetites**, whether we're talking about eating, drinking, sex, pornography, our insatiable need for entertainment, or materialism and compulsive buying, etc. But do our hard-to-control appetites really represent our root problem? Or are they actually **symptoms of a deeper problem**? Was Eve's problem in the Garden of Eden that she just couldn't resist that beautiful fruit? Was that her real sin? Or was that only a symptom of a deeper problem, namely, her casting off of the true authority over her life?! And what we don't realize is that our native idolatry has much more devastating effects and far-reaching consequences than what we can fathom. We are as blind to them as we are to the true glory of God!

- Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Church in NY, put it well in his book *Center Church*: "**Most of our problems in life come from a lack of adequate orientation to the Gospel.**" In other words, not having a clear grasp of the facts of the Gospel, or failing to interpret its implications and application, is the true source of our woes. A proper orientation to the Gospel begins with accepting its analysis of us: a broken race, proud of our glory and accomplishments, so much so that we would make them our ultimate pursuit, or become jealous that our neighbor has better things than we do or more favorable circumstances, so we obsess over the unfairness, and we cannot fix ourselves.

- So we are desperate for a change of values and identity, change of worldview and Ruler – and the Gospel speaks to all these needs! No other diagnosis so adequately explains the persistence of human corruption, the cruelty of human depravity, or the extent of evil in the world. Jesus nailed it! And of course, He got nailed for it. But ironically that was part of the solution! If He's able to diagnose us so perfectly, then we can expect His solution to be the perfect fit as well.

**5) The fifth thing God has impressed on my soul is His solution:** that He, our all-powerful Creator, would come to show us His strength and authority by submitting to weakness, submitting to corrupt human authorities (whom He would conquer by surrendering to them), showing His glory through His humiliation, submitting to the wretchedness hidden in our hearts and taking full responsibility for it – when it wasn't His fault, but He took the wrap!

- What rescuer saves lives by giving up His own? What hero rescues by suffering and dying? But Jesus rescues us from a plague we could not see and from a prison we could not touch! To do so, He became our faithful high priest, and through His death destroyed the one who held the dominion of death. Our Wise Creator bowed to the folly of His creatures in order to rescue us from ourselves. Our Just King submitted to the unjust verdict of His subjects in order to establish before all His right to judge and to manifest His mercy on us.

- Who can fathom such love, such sovereignty?! This is the New Testament's **theology of the cross**, expressed with multiple metaphors in Scripture (from liberation to reconciliation), because it describes God's huge solution to our overwhelming problem. So don't dwell on the surface of your salvation – go deeper! Understand the huge gift you've been given – it's intended to grip you with passion! It's the only safe place to deal with all your painful emotions, your unkind or unclean thoughts, your destructive

tendencies, the only place to nail all your idolatries. If you're not passionate about the cross, then you haven't yet caught the point of Christianity!

**6) The sixth thing that God has impressed on my soul is His method of drawing us to Himself and teaching us: through personal discipleship.** In effect, our God came to earth to be our "Yokemate!"

- The Holy Spirit wants to be under the same yoke with you – like a pair of oxen! What humility! That's how He wants to teach you the whole truth – from beside you! Jesus said it in Matt. 11: "Take my yoke and learn from me" – learn about your Yokemate by watching His every move, learning to discern His voice, letting yourself be led by His directing.

- Don't just wonder "what would Jesus do?" (WWJD), as if it were a philosophy. Talk to Him; let your inner monologue (self-talk) become a running dialogue with your Yokemate. It's ironic that we can invite Jesus into our heart, but then not address Him by name! Call on the Lord, call His name! In the Old Testament, they called Him Yahweh ("the One who is"), a treasured revelation. In the New Testament, Jesus was called Lord. Our English word "lord" comes from the Old English *hlaf-weard*, meaning loaf warden, the one who gave out the bread. Jesus IS the daily bread our souls crave. So speak to Him, call on Him. You don't get that bread and that nourishment into your hungry soul without calling on Him, confessing His name, praising Him – it's verbal! There's no other way to access Him because He is the Word! Ask Him, "Lord Jesus, what would you have me do? How should I respond? Please teach me" (Ps. 119, "teach me your decrees"). We must **ask** the Lord to teach us, to develop in us a teachable spirit, instead of assuming we already know it all! His Spirit is our Teacher. In Precept Bible studies, they use this reminder: "All Word = you dry up; all Spirit = you blow up; Word and Spirit together = you grow up." We need that balance.

- This personal discipleship is all about getting a bigger perception of the Savior! He's mighty to save – from idolatry and all its terrible consequences. Without a heart that worships Jesus, we are utterly lost, and we can't acquire that heart through our own efforts or actions. We can only cry out in our anguish and lostness for God to rescue us from the **folly of self-rule**, to come and take over the house of our lives. We are desperate for Him to rescue us from self-rule.

- But pain and sorrow are also a vital part of how God brings us to this realization and how He refines us – not that He has desired them for us or willed them specifically; but they are endemic to this world, part of the **consequences of our fallenness**. So don't be put off by sorrows, don't start doubting God's goodness just because you have to go through affliction. He is with you, He is not silent! In the movie "Silence," 17<sup>th</sup>-century priests sought to evangelize Japan, and when believers were persecuted, they found it difficult to discern God's voice in the face of suffering. But God is always present, and the Word He has spoken can never be silenced! Trials and heartaches actually serve to draw you closer to the Savior and help you know Him better.

- The **better you see Him**, the more you will follow His lead and be molded into His image. The **more you take up** your cross, the emptier everything else in life will feel. The **more you delight** in the Lord, the more useful you will become in His hands. The **more you're saturated** with His Spirit, the more you'll give off the fragrance of Christ. This is how we format our hearts and minds so that **the testimony of the cross and resurrection** becomes our **baseline reality**, and our lives thus acquire their "adequate orientation to the Gospel": anchored in that historical event and rooted in the testimony about it (Scripture).

- **Collective discipleship** is about the Body of Christ, the church, learning these lessons together: this is God's impressive method for world mission and kingdom expansion, His diverse family intended for love, bulwark of truth and light in a world of darkness.

**7) The seventh thing that God impresses on my heart is His glory** that awaits us, even though at present I feel I've only touched the hem of the garment of His glory – through His creation, His Word, His incarnation, His diagnosis and solution to our problems, His discipling. His Word says that "eyes have not seen, ears have not heard what God has prepared" for His children. It's beyond us, but Php. 3:20-21 and 1 Jn. 3:1-3 say we will be made like Him, and all who have this hope in Him purify themselves. Paul says "Christ in you" is "the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), and that Christ will complete the good work He has begun in us (Php. 1:6).