

The Demise of Preaching

Sometimes when we're reading the Bible we come across passages that ought to startle us. The Bible says some pretty amazing things – if we'll just take the time to stop and think about what it's saying. All too often we simply read right over a passage without bothering to give it some thought.

For example, after Nehemiah finished rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, he did something else of great importance: he teamed up with Ezra to read the entire Mosaic Law to the people. Just stop and think about that for a moment! Imagine reading the *entire* Mosaic Law at once. That's quite a task!

The reason he did that was because the people of Jerusalem weren't very familiar with it. The Israelites had been committing all kinds of terrible sins, and living lives that did not please God. To solve that problem, Nehemiah and Ezra taught the people what God's commandments actually were:

Nehemiah 8:2: “And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.

3 And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.

4 And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; ...

5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

6 And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

7 ... and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place.

8 So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

As you can see, the Levites put a lot of effort into this. They read the entire law of God, leaving nothing out. They read it distinctly so it could be understood. They also expounded upon the law so that people could understand what it actually meant. They wanted to make sure that everyone had heard the Mosaic Law and understood what it required.

Now, this was no small task. The Mosaic Law is much longer than just the 10 commandments; it contains a great many other rules as well. Anyone who has tried to read through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy knows just how many commandments there actually are. While it's true that much of Leviticus deals primarily with priestly matters and regulations regarding sacrifices, there are *still* a lot of commandments in those four books.

The process of reading the Law would obviously have taken more than just a few minutes. We can see in Nehemiah 8:3 that Ezra read “from morning to midday”. In other words, this process took *hours*. This was not a 30-minute sermon! I'd also like to point out that this was *not* light reading material: after all, it was an exposition on the Mosaic Law. It did not have funny stories and it was *not* entertaining. If you have ever read those four books of the Bible (and few people have), you know exactly what I'm talking about. That material is difficult, hard to read, and at times hard to understand.

Yet how did the people respond? Well, we're told in Nehemiah 8:3 that even though this process took hours, all of the people listened attentively. In fact, they paid so much attention that they became convicted of their sins and began to weep:

Nehemiah 8:9: "And Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said unto all the people, This day is holy unto the Lord your God; mourn not, nor weep. For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law."

Not only did these people pay attention for *hours* as the Levites expounded the *entire* Mosaic Law to them, but they also applied it to their lives and realized that they fell short. The people were so overcome by the magnitude of their sin that they began to weep. That is how much of an impact this sermon had on them.

Do you know what would happen if someone tried something like this today? Imagine for a moment a pastor telling his congregation that he is going to spend the next 4 hours preaching a sermon on the entire Mosaic Law. If anyone was foolish enough to try something like that, he would find himself out of a job. The deacons would bounce him right out of the pulpit and out into the parking lot, and his days at that church would be over. There would be a riot.

The reason the congregation would riot is because modern Christians have incredibly short attention spans when it comes to spiritual issues. Yes, the congregation will sit there while their pastor preaches a 30-minute sermon, but the odds are good they're not really going to pay that much attention to what he's saying. Instead of taking notes, you'll find people balancing their checkbooks or just sleeping through the message. Yes, there are some who pay close attention, but those are by far the exceptions. A great many people will have already forgotten most of what was said by the time they get out to the parking lot. If their preacher dares to go over 30 minutes, people will start to complain. A seven-minute overrun is the kind of thing that will make waves – it simply won't be tolerated. However, if the pastor's sermon runs short – say, he only talks for 20 minutes – there will be rejoicing. People love short sermons and they hate long ones.

Why is this? The answer is obvious: people don't really care very much for preaching. Interestingly, I've never heard anyone complain that a service had too much singing. I've seen people sit through hour-long musical presentations at church without a single complaint – but if the pastor had preached for an hour there would have been rioting. The reason for this is simple: people like to listen to music, and they don't like to listen to preaching.

Now, I don't think it's *just* a problem of attention spans. After all, the same people who complain if a sermon goes five minutes over are willing to stay up to two in the morning if the baseball game they're watching goes into nine extra innings. They'll gladly watch a three-hour-long movie, or spend six solid hours watching reruns of television shows. When it comes to something *they actually care about*, time is no object. People who would riot at the thought of a four-hour sermon would gladly spend four hours watching a football game. It's easy to understand why: they believe that football is fun and exciting, and they believe that sermons are boring and terrible. They want to dramatically limit their intake of sermons, but would never dream of dramatically limiting their intake of football.

I understand that there are some terrible preachers out there. I have heard people preach for an entire hour when they actually had nothing to say, and it was a painful thing to watch. If your point can be made in just 10 minutes then make your point and sit down; don't stretch it out to an hour just to hear yourself talk. Some people just like to rattle on.

But the problem that I see is *not* a dislike of bad sermons, but a dislike of sermons altogether. Many people who go to church have very little interest in hearing the Word of God preached. This is in

stark contrast to the people we see in the Bible, who *did* care and who *did* pay attention.

As we can see in the example of Nehemiah, the people stood there for *hours* and listened. They cared about what was being said so much that they were overcome by conviction. They took the message to heart. King Josiah had the same reaction when the Mosaic Law was read to him:

2 Kings 22:8: “And Hilkiah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. . .

10 And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king.

11 And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes.

12 And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest, and Ahikam the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Michaiah, and Shaphan the scribe, and Asahiah a servant of the king's, saying,

13 Go ye, enquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us.”

Here we have another instance where someone actually read the entire law. In this case, the law was read to King Josiah. What was the king's reaction? The Bible says he was so overcome that he rent his clothes. Not only did he pay attention, but he understood what the law meant. He knew that the nation had been disobedient and was in danger of facing the wrath of God. Conviction had set in, and he knew they were in a lot of trouble.

I realize that these were exceptional cases. The Israelites did not have the entire Law read to them on a regular basis – but when it was read, they listened. Have you ever tried to read the entire Mosaic Law in one sitting? I can't imagine any congregation allowing their pastor to read the whole thing to them; they would revolt. It simply wouldn't be tolerated. By modern standards that would be seen as a terrible sermon: dry, boring, and lacking in amusing anecdotes. But when Shaphan the scribe read it to King Josiah, it had such a huge impact on him that it changed the course of the nation.

Do you know why? It's because Josiah cared deeply about honoring God with his life, whereas we care deeply about being entertained. That's why Josiah eagerly listened to an hours-long recitation of hundreds of commands. His goal in life was *not* the pursuit of entertainment, but the pursuit of God. That is what he was passionate about.

We're very different: we mainly want to be entertained. If a sermon is fun then we'll listen to it, but otherwise it had better be short or we'll lose interest. Many modern Christians are focused on the pursuit of pleasure, not the pursuit of God. Because of this we have no patience for long messages, and even look down on what Shaphan and Ezra did. We have *lots* of attention for things that we care about, but when it comes to God, well, He had better keep His messages short and fun.

Did you know that Joshua also read the entire Mosaic Law to the people? In fact, when he read the Law there were even children present:

Joshua 8:34: “And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessings and cursings, according to all that is written in the book of the law.

35 There was not a word of all that Moses commanded, which Joshua read not.

before all the congregation of Israel, with the women, and the little ones, and the strangers that were conversant among them.”

Just imagine: even the children had to listen to it! They weren't sent off to children's church to get a more entertaining, age-appropriate message. No, they had to behave and listen while Joshua spent *hours* reading the Law to them.

This was not just an Old Testament thing. The apostle Paul also preached rather long sermons:

Acts 20:7: “And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.”

Incidentally, his sermon didn't stop at midnight. He actually kept preaching until the following morning:

Acts 20:11: “When he therefore was come up again, and had broken bread, and eaten, and talked a long while, even till break of day, so he departed.”

Can you imagine what would happen if the apostle Paul came to one of our modern churches and tried to preach a sermon that lasted *until morning of the next day*? Needless to say, the congregation's reaction would *not* be pretty! Now, if a baseball game went into extra innings and didn't finish until after midnight, well, that's understandable. People will stay up for that, because hey – it's baseball! But a sermon lasting that long is completely out of the question. Why, that's abuse! Did Paul not care about those poor people in the audience?

Now, I'm not saying that all of Paul's sermons were this long, nor am I suggesting that short sermons are evil. There is nothing wrong with preaching short messages. My point is that some of the sermons that we find in the Bible were actually incredibly long, and even though they powerfully impacted the people of that time they would never have been tolerated today. Something has changed, and it's not the Word of God.

Do you know why Paul could preach to that group for so long? It's because they had a genuine heart for God and cared about what the apostle was saying. People used to care deeply about the things of God. For example, a 13th century Catholic Inquisitor by the name of Reinerius said this about the Waldensians:

“They can repeat by heart, in the vulgar tongue, the whole text of the New Testament and great part of the Old: and, adhering to the text alone, they reject decretals and decrees with the sayings and expositions of the Saints” (Faber, p. 492).

These days most Christians haven't even bothered to *read* the entire Bible. Yet these 13th century Christians cared so much about the Word that they actually memorized *virtually the entire Book* – and this was during a time when owning a single page of the Bible could get you burned at the stake! Their passion for Bible study endangered their lives, and many of them were killed for it – and yet they were not deterred. Even though owning a Bible was a crime punishable by death, they still owned them, studied them, and memorized them. *That* is how much they cared.

Can you imagine these people limiting sermons to 30 minutes and complaining if they went five

minutes over? Can you imagine this group becoming irritated if the pastor spent a few minutes too long expounding on what the Word of God had to say? Of course not – it would be unthinkable. Things sure are different today, aren't they?

There is a preacher online who I enjoy listening to, who preaches sermons that are an hour and 45 minutes long. Since he has so much time, he is able to go into incredible detail. What people don't realize is that if you only have 30 minutes to cover an entire passage, you're really not going to be able to say very much about it. Imagine taking a 2-hour movie and cutting it down to half an hour. You're going to lose a lot when you do that. However, if you have more time then you can accomplish so much more. Think of it this way: if you have to cover all 12 chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes in four 30-minute sessions, you are going to be very limited in how much you can bring out. More time would make a big difference – but, seriously, who has the time? According to Nielsen, the average American watches *34 hours* of television a week. Sacrificing ten of those minutes to give the preacher more time is clearly out of the question. (In fact, I suspect that many churchgoers spend more time on Sunday watching television than they do listening to preaching!)

The real problem here is that many people simply do not care about the Word of God. We have lots and lots of time for things that we find entertaining, but somehow we can't be bothered to read our Bibles, or study them, or tolerate a sermon that's longer than a half-hour TV sitcom. We have passions, all right, but they're not for God. We may praise God with our lips, but our hearts are far from Him. After all, it's easy to see where our heart really lies: just look at where we spend our time!

If only we cared as much about the Word as our forefathers did. How different things would be! Maybe then people wouldn't go around thinking that the Sermon on the Mount was preached by Billy Graham.