

# The Demise of Preaching

The Bible is full of passages that ought to startle us. It teaches some pretty amazing things – if we take the time to think about what it's saying instead of reading right over the text without giving it much thought.

For example, after Nehemiah finished rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem he did something else of great importance: he joined with Ezra to read the entire Mosaic Law to the people. 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 it was because the people of Jerusalem weren't very familiar with it. The Jews had been committing all sorts of terrible sins, and living lives that didn't 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.”

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

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's read through Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy knows that the Law is packed with commandments. 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 have taken more than just a few minutes. We can see in Nehemiah 8:3 that Ezra read “from morning to midday”. That means this process took *hours*. This wasn't a 30-minute sermon! On top of that, this wasn't light reading material; it was an exposition on the Mosaic Law. It didn't have funny stories and it wasn't entertaining. If you've ever read those four books of the Bible you know what I'm talking about. That material can be difficult, hard to read, and hard to understand.

Yet how did the people respond? 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 were 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 they fell short. The people were so overcome by the magnitude of their sins that they began to weep. That's how much of an impact this 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 was going to spend the next 4 hours preaching a sermon on the entire Mosaic Law. I suspect that if anyone was foolish enough to try something like that today he would find himself out of a job. The elders 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 many modern Christians have short attention spans when it comes to spiritual issues. The congregation may sit quietly while their pastor preaches a 30-minute sermon, but in many cases the people don't pay that much attention to what he's saying. It's extremely rare for me to see anyone taking notes during sermons. Instead I see people balancing their checkbooks or just sleeping through the sermon. There are a few who pay close attention but they're the exceptions. Many people will have already forgotten most of what the pastor said by the time they get out to the parking lot.

People are also very sensitive about the length of sermons. I've been in a number of churches where sermons had to be kept quite short or else there would be consequences. If their preacher

dared to go over 30 minutes they would complain. Even a seven-minute overrun wasn't tolerated. However, if the pastor's sermon was short then there was rejoicing. The people loved short sermons and hated long ones.

Why is this? The answer is obvious: these people didn't 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: those people enjoyed listening to music but didn't enjoy listening to preaching.

I don't think it's just a problem of attention spans. The same people who complain if a sermon goes seven 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 hours watching reruns of television shows they've seen before. 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 limit their intake of sermons, not their intake of football.

I understand that there are some terrible preachers out there. I've heard people preach for an entire hour when they had nothing to say, and it was a painful thing to hear. If your point can be made in 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 isn't a dislike of bad sermons, but a dislike of sermons altogether. There are quite a few people in churches who 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 *did* pay attention.

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 Hilkiyah the high priest said unto Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. . .

10 And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah 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 Hilkiyah 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 his 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 these were exceptional cases. The Israelites didn't 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 very many congregations allowing their pastor to read the whole thing to them at once; it simply wouldn't be tolerated. By modern standards that would be viewed as a terrible sermon: dry, boring, and lacking amusing anecdotes. But when Shaphan the scribe read the law 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 many people in churches prefer to be entertained. That's why Josiah eagerly listened to an hours-long recitation of hundreds of commands. His goal in life wasn't the pursuit of entertainment, but the pursuit of God. That's what he was passionate about.

Our modern culture is different. Today people want to be entertained. If a sermon is fun then people will listen to it, but otherwise it had better be short or they will lose interest. Many modern churchgoers are focused on the pursuit of pleasure, not the pursuit of God. Because of this they have no patience for long messages, and look down on what Shaphan and Ezra did.

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 8:34-35:** “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. 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 and age-appropriate message. No, they had to behave and listen while

Joshua spent *hours* reading the Law to them.

This wasn't 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 visited a modern church and tried to preach a sermon that lasted *until morning of the next day*? Needless to say, I don't think the congregation's reaction would be pretty! Now, if a baseball game went into extra innings and didn't finish until after midnight, well, people would understand that. Fans of the game would stay up as long as it took because it's baseball! But a sermon lasting that long is completely out of the question.

I'm not saying that all of Paul's sermons were this long, nor am I suggesting that short sermons are evil. There's nothing wrong with preaching short messages! My point is that some of the sermons we find in the Bible were incredibly long, and even though they impacted the people of that time they wouldn't be 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 he 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 many Christians haven't even read the entire Bible. Yet these 13<sup>th</sup> century Christians cared so much about the Word that they actually memorized *virtually all of it* – 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. Many of them were killed for it and yet they weren't deterred. Even though owning a Bible was a crime punishable by death they still owned them, studied them, and memorized them. *That's* how much they cared.

Can you imagine these people limiting sermons to 30 minutes and complaining if they went seven minutes over? Can you imagine this group becoming irritated if their pastor spent a few minutes too long expounding on the Word of God? Of course not! But things are different today, aren't they?

There's 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's able to go into incredible detail. What many people don't realize is that if you only have 30 minutes to cover an entire passage you won't be able to say 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! 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're going to be very limited in how much you can bring out. More time would make a big difference. Keep in mind that according to



Nielsen, the average American watches *34 hours* of television a week. Sacrificing ten of those minutes to give the preacher more time doesn't seem like a big request to me. In fact, I suspect that many churchgoers spend more time on Sunday watching television than they do listening to preaching!

The real problem is that many churchgoers don't have a passion for the Word of God. They have lots of time for things they find entertaining, but somehow they can never find the time to read their Bibles, or study them, or tolerate a sermon that's longer than a half-hour TV sitcom. They have passions but they're not for God. They may praise God with their lips but their hearts are far from Him. It's easy to see where their heart really lies by looking at where they spend their time.

If only people 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.