

# BUILDING A SERMON WITH BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

**What exactly do we mean by the term Biblical Theology? And how does it help our preaching? PHIL CAMPBELL demonstrates as he builds a sermon on the book of Obadiah...**

These days, almost everyone wants to claim the term “Biblical Theology.” After all, anything that mentions “bible” and “theology” into the same breath has to be worth supporting. “Of course my theology is biblical,” you say. But when we use the term here in *Perspective*, we’re talking about a *method* - a method that informs, shapes, and drives the way we teach the bible. In technical terms, it’s our “hermeneutic” - our interpretive key. It’s a way of reading the bible that takes into account the broad sweep of the story that ties the whole bible together - a plotline that details the way God sets out to reverse the curse of sin through the offspring of Abraham.

It’s a story that starts right back at the beginning, with the blessing of God’s good creation. It’s a story that shudders at the profound effects of man’s decision to reject God’s rule. And it’s a story that is propelled forward by God’s promises to again bless the world through Abraham in Genesis 12 - promises of a new Eden, new people, and new blessing in place of the curse of sin.

Those promises play themselves out in the history of Israel - and so, they form the backdrop of the historical narrative that holds the Old Testament together. Abraham’s descendants grow into a nation; they take possession of their land; and, through their unfaithfulness, they lose it again as they are dragged into the Babylonian exile. In spite of later efforts to rebuild, it’s not until the coming of Jesus that we see God’s promises finally bearing fruit. And it’s in Christ, and his victory over sin at the cross, that we see God’s kingdom finally established - the curse of sin finally removed, as God creates a new people of blessing, who will ultimately be gathered in the new Eden of heaven.

Those are tightly packed ideas - but they’re important ones. And significantly, they provide the framework for properly understanding, and teaching, the Old Testament. Biblical Theology, then, as we use the term, first involves understanding each part of the bible in its narrative context. Next, it involves a process of working the key ideas of a passage forward to their fulfilment in Jesus; and finally, to working out the application to us.

It’s a process well described in Graeme Goldsworthy’s book *Gospel & Kingdom*. But how does it actually pan out in the process of building a sermon? That’s what we’re looking at in this feature, with the often overlooked book of Obadiah as our target text. Hey - if it works for Obadiah, it will work for anything!

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY AT WORK

There are six steps in building an Old Testament sermon - though you’ll realise as you look through them that step 3 is actually something *not* to do. It’s so important it’s worth saying at the outset - don’t, don’t, don’t start thinking about application until you’ve worked through the other stages!

- 1. Read the whole book looking for clues to the historical context.** Ask, “Where does this book fit in the overall story of God’s promises to bring blessing to the world through the descendents of Abraham?”
- 2. Try to isolate the central message or themes of the book.** How do these key themes relate to the fulfilment of God’s promises to Abraham?
- 3. Don’t rush in to thinking about present day application yet!** Don’t panic... we’ll get there. If you apply too soon, you’ll make the mistake of leaving Jesus out of the equation.
- 4. Ponder long and hard on how the key themes you identified in step 2 have been fulfilled,** and then transformed, by Jesus.
- 5. Think about how these transformed and fulfilled themes impact on our lives as Christians.** How do these things apply to us? How are we better off than the Old Testament people of God? In what ways do we face the same challenges? In what ways have things changed?
- 6. Contemporise the Issue.** Now that you’ve figured out how the key themes of the passage apply to us as Christians, it’s time to work out an introduction to your sermon that raises these issues in a stimulating way, and practical examples that will drive home the application.

## OPENING OBADIAH

### Applying the six steps.

**1. Read the whole book looking for clues to the historical context.** The great thing about Obadiah is that reading the whole book only takes a few minutes – after all, it's only 21 verses long! It's also reasonably easy to pick up the historical context. Obadiah accuses Edom of "standing aloof" while strangers carried off Israel's wealth (v11). The Edomites, Israel's "ancestral brothers," have "rejoiced over the people of Judah in the day of their destruction." (v12). It seems, then, the book is written after the exile, probably on Israel's return to the devastated promised land. The Edomites are still gloating over the fate of Israel, seemingly secure with their "homes on the heights." (v3)

**2. Ask, "Where does this book fit in the overall story of God's promises to bring blessing to the world through the descendants of Abraham?"** The exile called into question God's promises to Abraham. Has he deserted Israel? Was the promise of God's blessing simply a figment of their imagination? Are God's people just a relic of the past? That's apparently the conclusion the Edomites came to as they took advantage of Israel's misfortune. But, of course, God's promises still stand.

**3. Isolate the central message or themes of the book. How do these key themes relate to the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham?** Obadiah's prophecy is directed towards Edom. The descendants of Esau face disaster because of the way they failed to come to brother Jacob's aid. Verses 17 and 18 capture the thrust of the book – "But on Mount Zion will be deliverance; it will be holy, and the house of Jacob *will possess its inheritance*. The house of Jacob will be a fire... the house of Esau will be stubble." In other words, God's promise of an inheritance still stands. God's kingdom will last for ever – and Edom will disappear.

**4. Don't rush in to thinking about present day application!** Maybe you're tempted to preach a sizzling sermon on verse 12 – "You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune." After all, it's something we've all been guilty of... gloating over the occasional misfortunes of our more successful friends, perhaps? But Obadiah's point goes much further than this. If you take a turn-off here, you'll miss getting to the destination!

**5. Ponder on how the key themes have been fulfilled, and then transformed, by Jesus.** Obadiah finishes with the words "Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau. And the Kingdom will be the Lord's." Jesus, of course, is the deliverer *par excellence*, who went up to Mount Zion to face death on the cross. Edom has long disappeared, just as Obadiah said it would – and through Jesus, the house of Jacob has finally gained possession of its inheritance.

**6. Finally, think about how these transformed and fulfilled themes impact on our lives as Christians.** How do these things apply to us? It's easy to think of ways in which the world treats Christians in the same way as Edom treated Israel. But the world that would write us off as a spent force should be warned that as members of God's kingdom in Christ, we'll still be around when they're long gone! Like the Edomites, those who want to write off God's people as a spent force and gloat over our apparent weakness should be reminded that the promises of God to his people still stand. Like the Israelites, even though we might not look impressive, we are people with a great future!

Work out an introduction to your sermon that raises these issues in a stimulating way, and practical examples that will drive home the application. With the points from step 5 as a guide, it's easy to think of times when the world has treated Christians with disdain. Victorian Premier Jeff Kennet provided a classic opening example with his comment that "Christians are people of the past." The "science disproves Christianity" lobby group often says the same. Turn these thoughts into real life stories, and you've set the scene and raised the issues faced by Obadiah in a way that's relevant to every Christian today!

## THE FINISHED PRODUCT

When you've done all the legwork, writing the sermon isn't quite so hard. As I preached Obadiah, my goal was to share a little of my method with my congregation to help them in their own reading of the Old Testament. Because of that, you'll notice I've shown a little more of the background than I otherwise would.

Maybe it's not a *great* sermon – but it does offer a glimpse of the big issues that the Bible is tackling. Rather than moralising on the wrongs of taking advantage of your friend's adversity,

the sermon on the following pages gives reassurance to God's people that God has a proven track record of keeping his promises, and that we can stand with confidence - no matter what our opponents say or do.