

# **Christ-Centered Bible Study: Hearing the Music of the Gospel**

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## **The Music and the Dance**

Imagine yourself in a large house in which those who are deaf and those who can hear are living together.<sup>1</sup> In one of the rooms, you see a man sitting in a chair listening to music on his iPod. Rhythmically, he is tapping his foot, snapping his fingers and swaying to the beat of the song. His entire body moves in response to what his ears are hearing. It is obvious that he is enjoying himself.

A few minutes later, one of the deaf persons opens the door and enters the room. He carefully watches the person listening to the music and thinks to himself, “He seems to be having fun, I think I’ll try that too.” So, he sits down next to the man with the iPod and begins to imitate him. Awkwardly and haltingly at first, he tries to snap his fingers, tap his toes and move like the man next to him. After a little practice, he slowly begins to sway in time with the first man by watching and trying—mirroring his actions. Although he eventually gets better at keeping time, he concludes that it is not as much fun or as easy as it initially seemed. Indeed, it takes an enormous amount of effort to mimic the dance.

Imagine that a third person enters the room and watches this scene. What does he see? Two people apparently doing the same thing. Is there a difference? Absolutely! The first man hears the music and his actions are but a natural response to the music’s rhythm and melody. The second man is merely imitating the outward actions.

An important parallel exists to our Christian life. The “dance” represents the Christian life while the “music” represents the gospel. Sadly, we are often like the person in my story who tries to perform the dance steps without hearing the music. God’s heart is not simply to get us to dance but to get us to hear the music of the gospel—dancing reflexively follows. What follows in this article is a brief reflection on how to tune into the music of the gospel, listening for its rhythm as you read the Scriptures.

## **Understanding the Redemptive Focus of Scripture**

Often we look to the Bible seeing nothing more than a collection of ethical directives and moral imperatives instructing us in how to live. But to read Scripture this way is to reduce it to dance steps, the do’s and don’ts of the Christian life, and miss the melody entirely. To hear the music of the gospel, we need to understand how God intends his Word to function in our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> This illustration was developed by Larry Kirk. I am indebted to Larry for helping me better understand and experience how the Scriptures point us to the music of the gospel.

Toward this end, the writer of Hebrews gives us a push us in the right direction. In chapter four, he urges his readers not to be hard-hearted and miss the “rest” God has provided in Christ (Heb. 4:1-11). He closes with the following statement about God’s Word: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:12-13, ESV). Notice how he describes the role of Scripture in our lives—likening it to the sharpest sword imaginable, a sword that penetrates to the deepest recesses of our soul. As a result, we are “naked and exposed” before God. What the writer wants us to see is that Scripture, first, is designed to expose the sinful condition of our heart.

Several years ago I had a very stressful week prior to the start of major conference I was leading. A number of times, I found myself asking my wife’s forgiveness for being rude to her. However, in the back of my mind I really believed the problem was my circumstances: “If my life were not so stressful,” I told myself, “I would not be treating the people around me so poorly.” The following Sunday, our pastor spoke from Deuteronomy 8 about how God tests our hearts to reveal what is in them. It was as if God’s Spirit shined his spotlight in my heart saying, “Your problem is not these circumstances. These circumstances merely revealed what was in your heart.” This is precisely what Scripture is intended to do – to reveal our brokenness.

I realize that what I have said so far about the Scripture is not particularly upbeat and something you’d want to dance to. But that’s coming. The choreography of grace is indirect, by which I mean you cannot access it directly but must waltz first through brokenness and repentance. Those who seek to move directly to the upbeat and eliminate the downbeat, destroy the tune entirely.

Scripture, graciously, does not merely leave us naked, exposed in our sin. Notice how the writer of Hebrews continues: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16, ESV). The writer of Hebrews does not point us toward a program of behavior modification but to a *person*: the remedy to our brokenness not in corrective dance steps but in the person Christ.

Most scholars believe that the readers of Hebrews were Jewish Christians. A number of them had experienced persecution for following Christ and some were tempted to walk away from Christ. In this context, the writer of Hebrews paints a portrait of one who fundamentally understands because, in his human nature, he has experienced the exact same temptations as they have. Through this (and other portraits of Christ), the writer of Hebrews is attempting to woo the hearts of his readers to the love and beauty of Christ.

This highlights a second role of Scripture—namely, pointing our hearts to our Savior. We tend to limit this dimension of Scripture merely to those who are outside the Christian faith (i.e., the primary role of Scripture for the unbeliever is pointing his or her heart toward

Christ). We often fail to recognize that *our* hearts constantly need to be pointed to Christ as well. As believers, we are still tempted to make our lives work apart from Christ and often seek life apart from him in control, influence, approval, performance, or any number of alternatives. We, therefore, constantly need to be pointed back to the one in whom alone life can be found. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture does two things: (1) it exposes our brokenness and (2) points us to our savior. We will look at each of these in more detail.

## Portraits of Our Brokenness

The primary question on most of our minds as we read and apply Scripture is “What does this passage teach about what I am supposed to *do*?” If we read the Bible merely looking for dance steps (“What does this passage tell me to do?”), we will fail to hear the music of the gospel. To hear the music of the gospel, we must first ask a different question: “What does this passage reveal about our spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?”

Let’s look at a couple of examples. Imagine you are reading through the Gospel of Mark. In chapter ten, you read about an incident that took place as Jesus and his disciples were making their final journey to Jerusalem where he would be crucified. Immediately after Jesus tells his disciples that he will be spit upon, flogged and murdered in Jerusalem (Mark 10:32-33), James and John approach Jesus with a special request: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10:37). James and John were requesting special places of honor in his kingdom. They saw their association with Jesus as a means to future status, power and influence. As a result, they were blind to Jesus’ true purpose. At this point, you may be thinking, “How can they have been so blind?” But if we each ask the question, “What does this passage reveal about my spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?” we may very well see *ourselves* in the actions of Jesus’ disciples. Are we not also like James and John? On staff with Campus Crusade for Christ we may not make a lot of money; however, we certainly can look for life in power and influence and even use ministry (Jesus) as a means to that end.

Next, imagine you were reading through the book of Jeremiah. In the second chapter, you came across these words: “Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:12-13, ESV). The people of Israel were dependent on rainfall for their survival. They frequently collected rain water underground in cisterns hewn of rock. For people who lived in a drought-filled land, this imagery would be startling. The prophet claims that God’s people exchanged a rich flowing, fresh fountain for leaky buckets that cannot even hold life-giving water. As we reflect on this passage, we want to ask ourselves the question, “What does this passage reveal about our spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?” As we reflect on this question, we immediately recognize that this passage aptly describe our lives as well. When we look for life apart from Christ in relationships, success, control, influence, sexual fantasy, etc., we trade a fresh flowing spring for leaky buckets that cannot hold any water.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> To use a biblical term, we are “idolaters.” Idolatry is one of the major themes in Old Testament. What is the first commandment? “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). Idolatry is not merely about

## Portraits of a Beautiful Savior

Because Scripture has a redemptive purpose, it does not merely leave us exposed in our sin. It also points us to the music of the gospel (i.e., all that God is for us in Christ). Hence, there is a second question we need to ask as we seek to respond to God through his Word. After we have asked, “What does this reveal about my brokenness that requires the work of Christ?” we next must ask, “How does this passage point me to Christ and the ‘good news’ of the gospel?”

In a debate with Jewish leaders over his authority and identity, Jesus offers the following indictment: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40, ESV). Jesus was not talking with theological “liberals.” He was talking with the people who revered the Scriptures. Even though they carefully studied the Scriptures, Jesus claims that they completely missed the *meaning* of the Scriptures. They were looking for *life* in the wrong place. What was it that they missed? They had missed the redemptive purpose of Scripture: that they were designed to point us to Christ.<sup>3</sup> They had come to believe that Scripture’s role in redemption was in detailing for us the commands and demands that God required while missing that Scripture’s role in redemption was in pointing us to the Christ.

Again, note the difference in the following examples, when we come to the text not simply looking for dance steps but asking “How does this passage point me to Christ and the ‘good news’ of the gospel?” Two short examples may help make this question (“How does this passage point me to Christ and the ‘good news’ of the gospel?”) more concrete.

Matthew 4 records the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. If we read this passage simply asking “What does this passage exhort me to do?” we will not hear the music of gospel. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness will be reduced to a lesson about how to avoid temptation. While this story may have implications for how we handle temptation, it is crucial that we consider how this story points us to Christ. Matthew is drawing a parallel between the experience of the people of Israel and Jesus. Both were led into the wilderness. Both were tested. What happened when Israel was led into the wilderness? Israel failed. What happened when Jesus was led into the wilderness? He remained faithful. We must remember that the Gospels proclaim “good news.” In what sense does this passage offer “good news”? Like Israel, we too have been tempted and fail. If we were honest, we fail more often than we care to admit. We need someone who can live a perfect life in our

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creating a wooden statue to which we bow down in worship (cf. Ezekiel 14:1-8). Idolatry takes place anytime the functional trust of our heart shifts to someone or something other than Christ.

<sup>3</sup> In his book *Ancient Love Song*, Charles Drew rightly notes that Scripture points us to Christ in a complex variety of ways. The Law anticipates Christ by exposing our hearts and persuading us of our need for a savior. The promises anticipate him by kindling a longing at numerous levels that only Jesus can ultimately fulfill. Wisdom Literature compels us to look to Christ for meaning and for the ability to live wisely. The psalmists and prophets often speak with the voice of Christ, anticipating his own anguish and exaltation. Old Testament characters look forward to a prophet greater than Moses, a priest greater than Aaron and a king greater than David. Thus, the way Scripture points us to Christ in Genesis differs significantly from the way Scripture points us to Christ in the Gospel of John. See Charles D. Drew, *The Ancient Love Song: Finding Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2000).

place, on our behalf. And the great news of the Gospel is Jesus has done just that. Jesus, therefore, is not primarily our example in this passage. He is our hero. In a sermon on this passage, Jason Gibson sums this up well:

If Jesus had failed in the desert we could not have been put right with God, for there would have been no perfect sacrifice to take away sin forever, and no perfect life to be credited to our account. In the Gospel God treats Jesus as if He had failed and treats us as if we had never failed. In the Gospel Jesus is punished as if He had disobeyed God, and we are declared to be perfect as if we had never disobeyed God! Matthew's Gospel is about just that - the Gospel! Which is about Jesus, God's final obedient Son. The wait for an obedient son is over. He has arrived. Jesus is the new and better Adam, the true Israel who has defeated the devil and won back for rebels the paradise lost. And this is the Gospel that is available to all of us who admit our weakness and inability to overcome Satan, and trust in what Jesus has done for us on our behalf.<sup>4</sup>

By asking how this passage points us to Christ, we begin to hear music we might easily have missed.

Consider again the following passage in Hebrews 4: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:14-16, ESV).

We live in a world marked by suffering and difficulty. Parents married twenty years file for a divorce. A friend's life is tragically ended by an auto accident. A parent contracts a debilitating illness. As believers we sometimes find ourselves despairing in response to these circumstances. It's easy to feel like no one understands. Notice how the writer of Hebrews points our hearts to one who truly does understand, calling us to reflect upon Jesus' final hours: He was betrayed by a friend; abandoned by his disciples; endured unimaginable physical and emotional abuse; and experienced an excruciating death. He understands abandonment, loneliness, rejection, shame and deep sadness because he experienced these things himself. He can identify with the entire gamut of our painful experiences. Not only can we find understanding in Christ, but when we draw near to him we also find "mercy and grace to help in time of need." Thus, as we ask the question, "How does this passage point me to Christ and the 'good news' of the gospel?" we see that the "good news" is that we have a savior who understands suffering and pain because he has experienced them himself.

## Hearing the Music: An Example from Ephesians

What we've been saying, and hopefully you've been hearing, is that in order to hear the music of the gospel, we need to consider how a passage exposes our brokenness and how it

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<sup>4</sup> Jason Gibson, "Finally . . . An Obedient Son." [www.beginningwithmoses.org/briefings/matthew4v1to11.htm](http://www.beginningwithmoses.org/briefings/matthew4v1to11.htm), accessed December 21, 2007.

points to Christ. Having considered both these elements separately, let's put them together by looking at one final example from Ephesians in more detail in order to envision what a gospel-centered / Christ-centered approach might look like.

Imagine that you are studying Ephesians 4:25-5:2.

<sup>25</sup>Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. <sup>26</sup>Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, <sup>27</sup>and give no opportunity to the devil. <sup>28</sup>Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. <sup>29</sup>Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. <sup>30</sup>And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. <sup>31</sup>Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. <sup>32</sup>Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. <sup>1</sup>Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup>And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

You might begin by reflecting on the context of this passage. This passage comes in the second half of Paul's letter. He has just finished describing God's provision for growth in and through the church: God has given them spiritual gifts in order to build up the church for the glory of Christ. In 4:1, Paul exhorts them to live in a manner worthy of their calling. In 4:17 we find this same exhortation stated negatively: "do not live as the Gentiles live." In 4:25-5:2, Paul begins to describe how their lives will look different as they live out their new identity.

Next, you might make observations about the passage. You might note that it is full of commands. In addition, there are numerous contrasts (falsehood vs. truth, stealing vs. sharing, corrupt talk vs. words of encouragement, etc.). These contrasts seem to play a central role in the passage. Along the way, you might explore the meaning of key terms in this passage using a Bible dictionary. You might also consult a commentary.

But the real difference comes as we think about how to "apply" this passage to our lives. If we read the Bible as a collection of ethical directives, we may simply read this passage looking for dance steps. This passage certainly does contain a lot of dance steps—both steps to avoid (lying, anger, stealing, etc.) and steps to follow (speaking truth, sharing, building up through our speech). In a small group Bible study, we might discuss in detail what these steps look like. For example, we might identify examples of corrupt speech in our lives and talk about what it would look like to build others up. We might conclude by reminding our participants that we must imitate Christ and pray for each other. The problem with this approach is that it bypasses the music that motivates the dance.

A "Christ-centered" approach to applying this passage differs not because it ignores the *dance steps*, but rather because it searches for the *music*. At this point we want to ask the first

question I introduced earlier in this article: “What does this passage reveal about our spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ?”

On one level, the answer may seem quite obvious. We can find a whole list of sinful behaviors in this passage; however, to see how this describes our brokenness, we must dig deeper. We may find it helpful to ask, “What do all the sinful behaviors listed in 4:25-5:2 have in common?” As we look at them together, it becomes clear that Paul is speaking about various patterns of self-centeredness that destroy relationships. Moreover, it is clear that Paul is not merely interested in restraining outward expressions of sinful behavior but he is looking for inward transformation that expresses itself in forgiveness. Our self-centeredness stands all the more brightly in contrast to Christ’s self-sacrifice (5:2). We need to see that our problem is deeper than the need for moral reformation. We need a savior.

In this passage we not only encounter portraits of our brokenness but also portraits of God’s redemptive work. The “music” in this passage is found in Eph. 4:32-5:2. Paul reminds us of the forgiveness we have experienced in Christ at the cost of his life. He is not merely giving us an example to follow but he is also pointing us to the music that motivates the dance. We are to forgive “as Christ forgive us” (4:32) We are to love “as God loved us” (5:1-2). But how do we do this? The answer? By richly experiencing God’s love and forgiveness.

Imagine, for example, you only have one hundred dollars to your name and someone steals it. This would feel like a knife in the heart. Imagine, in contrast, if you had a billion dollars in the bank and someone were to take one hundred dollars from you. This would be more like a prick in the finger. The same crime is experienced in two different ways.

Now imagine two people. They are both Christians and they are both in situations where they are being criticized. One of them is able to listen and sort through the criticism, admitting to what is true and patiently responding to what they feel to be unfair. By their response you can tell that the criticism they are receiving is like a prick in the finger. Why? Because that Christian, believing in the truth of God, knows and experiences the “richness” he possesses in the Father’s love because of his faith in Jesus Christ.

The other Christian, however, faces the same kind criticism and yet they are consumed with anger. They hate criticism and so they shift the blame or spiral into self-loathing. They are full of the rage and anger that Ephesians 4 tells us to get rid of. It is clear that what they are experiencing is not a prick in the finger but rather a knife in the heart. Why? Because they are not believing the truth about how incredibly rich they are in the love of God through Jesus Christ.

The “Christ-centered” point of Ephesians 4 is clear: if you know how richly you are loved by Christ then your criticism is just a prick in the finger and not a stab in the heart. It's like someone stealing a hundred dollars when you possess billion.

Paul ends the first half of Ephesians with a prayer in which he pray that, in the deepest recesses of our being, we would have power from the Holy Spirit to know how wide, how high, how deep, and how long is the love of God in Christ and be filled with the fullness of God (Eph. 3:14-21). In essence, Paul is praying that God’s Spirit would enable us to hear

the music of the gospel. It is only as we hear *this music* that we can forgive as we have been forgiven (Eph 4:32) and love as God loves us (Eph. 5:1-2).

## Conclusion

Our hearts were made to respond to the music—the music of the gospel. As we allow Scripture to expose our brokenness and point us to our savior, we will richly experience the gospel. As Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, explains, “[The gospel ] tells us that we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted than you ever dared hope—at the same time. In fact, if the gospel is true, the more you see your sin, the more certain you are that you were saved by sheer grace and more precious and electrifying that grace is to you . . .” You are going to have the opportunity to apply these two questions as you reflect on six passages in Ephesians in the study that follows entitled, “Hearing the Music of the Gospel in Ephesians.”

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## Questions for Reflection and Discussion with your Trainer

- Reflect on Keith’s two questions for Jeremiah 2:11-13 (or one of the other passages discussed in the article) and then share what you learn with your trainer: (1) What does this passage reveal about your spiritual brokenness that requires the redemptive work of Christ? and (2) How does it point you to Christ and the gospel?
- Do you feel like you are hearing “music” as you read the Scriptures? Why or why not?
- Describe a time recently when Scripture exposed your brokenness and idolatry.
- Describe a time recently when the “good news” of the gospel became real to you as you were reading God’s Word.
- How do you think you might help the students you lead hear the music of the gospel as you teach them the Scriptures?
- How might helping your students see their need for a savior as they read the Scriptures affect their motivation to communicate the good news to others?

## Resources for Further Study

The following will help you learn how to experience the music of the gospel as you read the Scripture:

- Ephesians Small Group Lessons (available online under the “Resources” link at <http://ibs.campuscrusadeforchrist.com>).
- *Gospel Transformation Handbook* (World Harvest Mission, [www.whm.org](http://www.whm.org)).
- John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Crossway).
- Sinclair Ferguson, *In Christ Alone: Reflections on the Heart of the Gospel* (Ligonier).
- C. J. Mahaney, *Living the Cross Centered Life: Keeping the Gospel the Main Thing* (Multnomah).
- Daniel Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Presbyterian and Reformed), especially chapter 12.
- Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 2d ed. (Baker), especially chapters 2, 10 and 11.
- Tim Keller’s Sermons ([www.Redeemer.com](http://www.Redeemer.com)).