
Rain: Showers of Doctrine

Topical

Introduction At a wedding it is a tradition to give something old and something new. Over the next two weeks I want to give you something old and something new. As we preached our way through Genesis, we saw over and over again how the narratives and themes point us down range to the Lord Jesus, His doing and dying. Genesis helps to give an identity sketch of the coming Redeemer and Ruler. Over the last three weeks we have looked at particular themes in Genesis. We gloried in Christ, grew in faith and saw the grandeur of the names of God.

There are these great themes and analogies running all through the Bible. They center in Christ and hold out for us the glories of Christ and the good for God's people. We will look at just two of these today and next Sunday. Today, we will be moving toward Jesus through an analogy. Next Sunday, we will move toward Jesus through one of the central themes of the Bible, the dwelling of God with man. Here is something old and something new. One was originally developed in early in ministry. The other, fairly recently. It has been wonderful this week to go back and work hard over early thinking – this is not just yesteryear's ground-up baby food. But the joy of discovery has brought us over and over again to the great and grand themes arching across the whole of the Word of God.

We all know the importance of rain. I grew up in an area of Africa that had two seasons – very wet and very dry. We would go months without seeing a drop of rain. And we would go months of almost steady rain. So during the wet season, we grew the most in our gardens. We also were very careful to be sure our cistern was filled. During the rainy season the veldt was green and lush. Sometimes we could stand outside and watch the storms moving in across the plains.

Rain and dew are used in the Bible as analogies for doctrine, truth and the Word of God. Three Bible writers use this analogy to warn us about our response to truth and to doctrine. Let's take them up this morning as we consider rain, the showers of doctrine.

Take Heed What You Believe

Deuteronomy 32:1-6

Moses ends his three sermons with a song. He has taught God's people how to please God from the heart. He has interpreted their wilderness wanderings through a God-centered grid. He has laid out God's purposes in calling them to be His people in fulfillment of His promises. He has warned them of the spiritual dangers as they prepare to cross into the Promised Land. Now it is time to sing over truth.

A Demanding Cry

(v.1)

The call here is like that in prayer: we want God's attention so that He will respond. So Moses begins the same way: the earth and heavens must hear in such a way so as to respond. It is a call to take heed, to pay attention.

A Beautiful Comparison

(v.2)

What are God's people to listen to? They are to give heed to the instruction he has given. Yes, he can just say that. He can just tell them to be attentive. But through a beautiful analogy he shows the life giving and sustaining benefit of instruction.

He sings his desire that his teaching may fall like the rain and like the dew. May the tender grass and growing herbs tilt back their hearts to be refreshed and nourished by the rain and dew of truth. Truth through instruction is like rain. It is life giving. It is life sustaining. It is refreshing. On the edge of the wilderness and on the border of the Promised Land, the people of God need instruction like plants of the field need rain.

A Divine Cause

(v.3)

But it is not just any instruction. The reason his instruction is like rain is because it is about the character and cause of God. The content of his doctrine has the fame and reputation, the name of God as the central theme. Moses, in 31 chapters of 3 sermons declares that all of this has been to proclaim the name of God. Preaching should be first and foremost about God. It should be to declare who He is and what He has done. In proclaiming God, it must elevate the greatness of God. The sense of its teaching, the sound of its falling words like rain on grass should be, "How great is our God." Teaching that is rain and dew to thirsty hearts will ascribe greatness to God.

A Horrific Contrast

(v.4-6)

The stanza that begins in verse 4 is truth like rain. It is proclaiming the name and fame of God. It is ascribing greatness to God. How? By declaring the perfections of God. He is the Rock, the stable, unchanging foundation for our lives. All that He does, all His works are perfect. There is no flaw or folly in the providences of God. His character is just in such a way that His ways are justice. He does what He says. He calls to account those who violate His Word and will. He is faithful, or even stronger, a God of faithfulness. All that He is marks Him out as One who is faithful to Himself. He is without iniquity. He is pure and holy. He cannot be charged with sin. He is just and upright.

These truths about God are the rain and dew. God's people ought to hear, believe, rejoice and respond with loving gladness and obedience. Make no mistake that Moses and Israel must be careful to know and believe these things. Moses is a man who brought water from the Rock (and Paul tells us that Rock was Christ) and who struck the rock with the consequence of not

being able to enter the Land. But these great truths fall like rain and dew in his own heart so that he cheerfully submits to the good providences and just consequences from a faithful, promise-keeping God.

But this is not how they have responded. Verses 5-6 are a startling contrast with the expected response to the character of God. The people have dealt corruptly with Him. They are blemished, crooked and twisted. Rather than growing up as tall wheat and sweet herbs, they are gnarled, twisted, stunted, poisonous, odious weeds. They are cut off and cut down. They have refused to believe the instruction of truth. They have rejected the God who has been taught them. The wilderness in their view was unjust, unloving and a profitless providence. In rejecting the providences of God they have rejected the person of God.

The focus of all true teaching is to cause us to better understand and properly respond to God. When truth falls like rain and dew, God's people should respond with love, gladness and obedience. Brother and sisters, "Take heed what you believe." May the rain of truth, the dew of instruction fall on welcoming, worshipping hearts.

Take Heed What You Think

Isaiah 55:6-11

This idea of rain as truth occurs again in Isaiah. The prophet has been writing to show the glory of the redeeming grace to all the people groups. Israel had erred in confusing that salvation is from the Jews alone, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ, with salvation is for the Jews alone. But as redemptive history is moving toward its center with the coming of the Redeemer, then the clarion call to all the people groups is growing. But the opposition to such a call is based on a certain way of thinking. So Isaiah 55 is a challenge to take heed to what you think.

A Gracious Call

(v.6-7)

The gracious invitation here is to all, to all who thirst (v.1) whether in the nation of Israel or not. It is a reflective call – to seek the Lord and call on Him and to forsake wicked ways and thoughts. All of you who are thirsty, seek and call on the Lord. But know this, to follow the Savior means you must flee your sins. If you will go after Christ, you must go away from your sin. The point of salvation is to deliver from sin.

This gracious call comes from the Lord who is near, compassionate and poised to forgive. We seek one who has already sought us. We are not initiating the move – His call has and does. Through the hearing of the call, many will heed it and seek the Lord. Here is the inducement, the encouragement to respond. God is ready to forgive. He is poised with deep feelings of compassion to abundantly, freely, grandly pardon.

A Needed Correction

(v.8-9)

But God's people are sometimes not thinking like this. Like Israel, we err in the way we think. The problem is essentially that we keep trying to bring God down to our level. We want our God to be manageable. We want Him to be easy – a Sesame Street God who is warm, fuzzy, available, and full of really helpful stuff. Basically, we try to imagine that God is much like us and thinks like us.

Certainly, He is not. His thoughts, plans and purposes are so great, so grand and so glorious that we struggle to comprehend even the small portion of them that are clearly revealed. This sense of a compassionate and abundantly pardoning God was not the way Israel was thinking

and I am concerned, not the way we are thinking. So where we are wrong in the way we think, we need to change. This text illustrates one wrong way to think about God, about His Word, about a general call to repentance and an effective change wrought by God.

A Striking Comparison

(v.10-11)

The Word of God going forth is compared to rain and snow. Like the rain and snow that falls to the earth, waters the earth and the seeds spring forth, so the Word of God goes forth and does what God intends. God has designed and determined that cycle of rain, seed, harvest and food that sustains all life on the earth. This is not a chance happening. It is not just the way it is. It is the clear design and intent of God.

So is the unfolding of redemptive history and ever enlarged call to the lost. God began with a man and wife, then families, then a nation and now, all the people groups. He gave His Word to Adam, then to the patriarchs, then to Israel and now, in Christ and through the Apostles to the world through the church. This is not an accident of chance. It is the magnificent plan of God. It is His purpose.

Further, it is His purpose to send it to all *and* to make it effective in some. We are responsible to take the gospel and the truth to all the people groups. We are responsible to give out the clarion call to all. We are to proclaim to everyone that if they are thirsty, God is good and gracious to save and will save them. And, God will make that call, that giving of the gospel to all, to be effective in some. He guides the Word and as it goes, sends the Spirit to regenerate as He wills and brings forth spiritual life, faith and repentance where He pleases. We need to think with both sides of this truth. Given to all, given for all, and responded to by those according to God's will.

And lastly, it is His purpose to send it in a way that guarantees it will produce where He intends for it to produce. God requires that we be clear and correct in our understanding and our proclaiming of the gospel. Rain and dew mixed with poison will pollute and ruin the ground on which it falls. We must be giving as pure a rain as we can.

There are ways to get this instruction wrong. There are ways to misread, misunderstand and thus think wrongly about the free offer of the gospel and the effective results the Word produces.

First, God's Word will *always* change people in salvation and sanctification. So just give the Word and people *will* change. God has guaranteed that since the Word cannot return empty, then you will get results. But this is **not** what Isaiah is saying.

Second, I don't have to be careful in giving the Word because God controls the response to it. He will cause it to do what it is supposed to whether I get it correct or give it out clear. God has guaranteed the results regardless. Again, this **not** what Isaiah is saying.

It is thinking like this that Isaiah wants to turn around. Like rain and snow and dew that come down everywhere on the earth, on the plants and tress, so should the Word of God just go everywhere. It should have spread in the Old Covenant. It should be spread in the New Covenant. It should be given widely and broadly. And, it will only accomplish that to which God has sent it according to His purposes. In other words, there are no guarantees. Just because you give the Word doesn't mean you will get change. But just because you might not get the change doesn't mean we don't give the Word.

The focus of all true thinking is from the Word. We must think His thoughts, God's thoughts after Him. Brother and sisters, "Take heed to what you think." Your thinking is the source of your feelings and your actions. May our thinking about the glorious call from God to all, and the sure response to the Word according to God's purposes, launch a thousand conversations to the lost about our abundantly forgiving God.

Take Heed How You Hear

Hebrews 6:1-9

The preacher, who wrote Hebrews for a faltering congregation pressured by persecution and tempted to return to their former religions, strongly warned them to pay attention to how they hear. Their soul's very welfare was at stake. Do not hear me to be saying that true believers can lose their salvation. But believers persevere in their salvation by hearing strong exhortations to persevere.

The Foundational Imperative

(v.1-3)

We are beginning at a conclusion that flows from what he has said in chapter 5. The Hebrews were dull of hearing and in real need of getting experience with the milk they had so as to reach a maturity that could feast on meat. In the light of that, then here is what we must do.

What we must do is given in two verbs: leaving and going on. In these two verbs is actually a single action. To go on, I must leave. To come to church, I must leave my house. To go on to maturity I must leave elementary teachings. This "going on to maturity" is in the passive voice. It has the sense of being borne along, of submitting to the maturing influences. I got on the boat with my mom and dad and the boat carried me along to its destination.

They were leaving and going on in maturity in regards to three fundamental truths. They were going on to maturity in truths relating to personal salvation. They were leaving and going on in truths relating to public confession. They were going on to maturity in truths relating to basic eschatology. If you are going to grow up, there are certain foundational truths that you must grasp and on which this maturity rests. You must believe in an obeying way that Jesus Christ is the center of all that it means to be a Christian. You must turn away from a reliance on works and on a law principle and trust Jesus to save you. You must understand the importance of publicly confessing your faith through baptism. You must understand the foundational truths that relate to being in submission to the elders and being served by the deacons. You must believe that what you are doing now matters because you will come to life after death and you will experience either conscious eternal punishment or conscious eternal blessing. And if you are going to grow up, you must begin using these truths to discern right from wrong and go on the meat of the Word.

They would do this if God permits. Leaving elementary truths and moving on to maturity will happen if God allows it. Here is our utter dependence on God. God is governing the steps and stops of our growth in grace towards glory. He is sovereign over both our salvation and our transformation. That we grow is enabling grace. It is moving forward as God permits. So we must at all points hear and heed exhortations to grow up, to move on, to change, all the while humbly confessing our dependence on God for each step.

The Frightening Impossibility

(v.4-6)

In the light of what we have just said, the next paragraph suddenly becomes quite clear. If moving on to maturity is commanded and under the sovereign control of God, what about those who not only do not go on, but actually fall by the wayside? In other words, what danger lies ahead of a person who is professing to be a believer and then rejects Christianity?

Here is the core sentence from this paragraph. “It is impossible to renew to repentance those who fall away.” There is a category of people who, if they fall by the wayside (this is not the word usually used for apostasy) cannot be brought back to a place where they will have a true change of heart and mind. Now if you want to say that it is Christians who are falling from grace, then there is no second chance. It is irreversible.

These people are described as sharing in the experiences of Christianity. They have had high religious experience. They have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared [or become partners] of the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of God’s Word and experienced the miracles that will be a part of the eschatological age. Whether these are true believers are not *cannot be determined from the description of their experiences*. After all, there will be people sent to hell who preached and cast out demons and did miracles in Jesus Name (Matthew 6:21-23). So loved ones, sharing in high religious experiences is not how you know if you are believer.

Here is how you know if you are a true believer. Do you fall by the wayside? Do you reject the truth of the Word? Having heard and experienced and shared in the goodness and glories that are our present privilege and our future hope, you turn away from them and leave them and do not continue to embrace them. You turn aside from being carried along by the sovereign providence of God towards continuing in your faith and you abandon the faith. The effect is to hold Jesus up for contempt – you show that you think little of His cross and His crown.

The Familiar Illustration

(v.7-10)

That this is what the author intends is clarified by the now familiar illustration. Here is truth that comes like rain. Here is the Word of God that brings us to maturity and warns us not to go back and exhorts us to go on. The rain that falls and the soil it lands on are all the same. It is what is produced that makes the difference. One produces good crops and thus is useful to the farmer and is blessed. The other is useless in the thorns and thistles it grows and is still under the curse and eventually will be judged.

He is persuaded of something different. His assurance to them turns on the word “but”. In contrast to what he has described, he has an informed confidence that they are and will prove to be different. The encouragement comes in the tender use of the word *beloved*. It is the only time in the whole treatise that it is used. The encouragement also comes in the use of the word *better*. What he observed in their lives was so much better than those whose profession of faith was not sustained by the grace of God. Thus, grace was producing in real believers those things that accompanied and came along and flowed from true salvation. How can he say this? Because of what was true about the character of God and what he had observed in them. The rain had fallen and a harvest of righteousness had sprung up, so go on to maturity. How? Through two important words: diligence and assurance. We must be diligent and we will gain assurance. How long must this be true? Till the end. Show diligence to gain assurance all the way to the end.

So brothers and sisters, "Take heed how you hear." The Word and truth that is raining down into your life must produce fruit, must cause you to go on to maturity. Pay close attention to loving and strong words of exhortation to persevere. Why? That is how you will go on and grow up.

Lessons

A central feature of all true doctrine and teaching is the greatness and glory of God. So we must be very careful in what we believe, to believe the truth and thus to respond to God.

Our doctrine and teaching must never reduce God to the level of man. He, His ways, and His thoughts are higher than ours. So, we must be very careful in how we think with the Scripture we hear.

The goal of doctrine and teaching is to go on in maturity. If we are to go on to maturity, we must be very careful to how we hear the Word.

May we be tender grass and growing herbs who tilt back our hearts to be refreshed and nourished by the rain and dew of truth.

Finally, Hosea 6:1-3 focuses this theme on our crucified and risen Lord.

Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth." [ESV]

