

Retelling Inspired Stories: An Overview of Preaching Biblical Narrative

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Abstract

This thesis serves as an overview of preaching narrative passages of Scripture. The stories in the Bible are powerful and impacting when preached properly. Expository preaching is the most effective model from which to preach narrative because exposition respects the nature and form of narrative as a genre of literature. The interpretation of narratives must be approached in a unique way to accommodate the literary elements and plot development of each story. Once the big idea of a biblical story has been discovered, the preacher must present the passage in narrative form, contrasting a traditional sermon outline of several points. Every narrative sermon should ultimately be identified in the context of the great story of redemption, lifting up the Lord as the Author and Hero of every story in the Bible.

Retelling Inspired Stories: An Overview of Preaching Biblical Narrative

Biblical preaching has always been a vital part of church health and growth. From conception of the church age, God has chosen to speak to men through the preaching of His Word. Paul let this be known in Titus 1:3, saying, "...but at the proper time manifested, even His word, in the proclamation with which I was entrusted according to the commandment of God our Savior."¹ Thousands of God's men have been obeying this noble and solemn command since the church's birth, but the approaches to the teaching of Scripture have changed throughout time. In recent years, a common, but inadequate model of preaching has emerged as the most popular method. In this model, a preacher examines a portion or portions of Scripture, determines several (usually three) theological or practical points, and arranges the points in logical order with scattered illustrations and application. While this model may seem like an effective first-world teaching method, it flows against the organization of many passages of Scripture.² The Bible contains numerous genres of writing, some of which do not comfortably fit into a three-point model.³ Biblical narrative may be the most aggressive of these challengers of the mold. Because the stories of the Bible are unique pieces of literature, they deserve a unique attention, devotion, and approach when being preached.

Exposition: The Best Approach to Narrative

Before he jumps to conclusions about what sermon outline or model is most effective in preaching, a preacher must first examine how he mentally defines a

¹ All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

² Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 20.

³ Ibid.

successful preaching event. Some label their sermon a success by how many “Amen!” shouts came from the audience or how many knees were at the altar during the invitation; others may thrive on compliments, Internet views, and increasing church attendance. Surprisingly, the Bible gives no credence that popularity or spiritual response are indicators of good preaching. If that were the case, then Paul was not preaching faithfully in Lystra where he was stoned (Acts 14:19). Noah, Isaiah, and even the Lord Jesus were proclaimers of God’s Word whose messages were hated and rejected throughout their ministry. However, each of these men had an outstanding similarity: they preached the Word of God without wavering or compromise. In the church today, the Bible is the received Word of God which needs to be preached faithfully without the perversion of human manipulation. Having received the Word, preacher must determine the best way to proclaim the Word to the people. Expository preaching of the Word is the most effective approach through which preachers can proclaim the truths of Scripture.

To preach exposition does not indicate placing any sort of static model on any given sermon. Instead, exposition surrenders the form of the sermon to whatever form the passage dictates. David Helm accurately defines the term in this way: “Expository Preaching is empowered preaching that rightfully submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical passage.”⁴ Delivering the Word of God to a congregation is an immense responsibility, and the preacher errs when he presents his own words instead of God’s. John Stott writes, “To expound Scripture is to bring out of the text what is there and expose it to view.”⁵ The primary attribute of exposition is its

⁴ David R. Helm, *Expository Preaching: How We Speak God’s Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 13.

⁵ John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 125-126.

submitting nature toward whatever message and form an individual passage of Scripture contains. Walter Kaiser expresses this in his definition: “Expository preaching is that method of proclaiming the Scriptures that takes as a one paragraph of Biblical text and derives from that text both the shape and the content of the message...”⁶ Tony Merida gives a more foundational definition of expositional preaching, as he writes, “Expository preaching as a sermon form means to preach ‘verse *by* verse’ instead of preaching ‘verse *with* verse.’”⁷ Merida pinpoints expository preaching as respectfully presenting an entire passage of Scripture at a time, not forming a collection of similarly themed verses from many different contexts.⁸ His definition expresses the distinction between expositional and topical preaching (verse *with* verse) which will be discussed later. Effective preaching of biblical narrative starts with a commitment to expositional preaching for its high reverence and attention to the words, truths, and forms of Scripture.

Benefits of Expositional Narrative Preaching

Concerning narrative preaching, an expositional mindset is vital. In a sense, the moral of a story is in the power of the storyteller. A preacher, then, has an extreme responsibility to exegete Scripture well by determining the original meaning of a text. A commitment to exposition gives the preacher two distinct advantages in the study.

The Unifying-Theme Advantage

Biblical stories can be easily altered or shaded to present an unintended truth. For instance, the story of David and Goliath could seamlessly and incorrectly be presented as

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching* 11, no. 2 (September/October, 1995), 4.

⁷ Tony Merida, *Faithful Preaching: Declaring Scripture with Responsibility, Passion, and Authenticity* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2009), 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*

a message about missions and evangelism. Consider this three-point outline: 1) Be willing to go to the battlefield. 2) Equip yourself with the right ammunition. 3) Stand up boldly to oppositions. While this outline uses progressing elements of the story, it ignores the fact that Samuel had a completely different point in mind about the power of God working through David. The foundational error in the construction of this hypothetical sermon is the misuse of the narrative progression. Teaching points are invented and emphasized out of events which move the story along. David's collection of five smooth stones may contain a small truth, complementary to the overall point of the passage, but it should not be brought forth as a main sermon point. An expositional preacher would approach this passage in 1 Samuel 17 as one overarching story with one unifying truth supporting and developing the entire story. In other words, the preacher needs to understand the end of the story before he determines how to present the beginning and middle of the story. As J. Tyler Scarlett has commonly stated, "Find the one thing the whole thing is saying."⁹

The Original-Intention Advantage

Approaching narrative with an expositional mindset directs the preacher down the right path of interpretation before he even reads the passage. Since God is wiser than any man, preachers can be confident that God's communication of a single truth through a powerful story was the most effective means. God's used stories to reveal Himself because of their relatable and memorable nature.¹⁰ Expositional preaching can be a rigorous practice, but God is most respected and glorified through its execution. John

⁹ J. Tyler Scarlett, "PLED 421, Homiletics" (unpublished class notes, Liberty University, Fall 2015).

¹⁰ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 39.

McArthur consolidates the duty of exposition well when he writes, “Expository preaching involves presenting a passage entirely and exactly as God intended.”¹¹ Narrative as a genre was intended to be used by God in a specific way to teach the reader and touch a congregation. The experiences of the character in biblical narrative were given to us as an example according to 1 Corinthians 10:11: “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction...” The examples set forth in the narratives teach readers eternal truths about who God is, how He works, and what He desires from people. Exposition in the study and presentation of Scripture most effectively stewards the truth of biblical narratives in the way God intended His stories to be understood.

Setbacks of Topical Narrative Preaching

In a conversation with an aspiring young preacher, a Wesleyan pastor once said he admired the concept of expositional preaching, but he felt the style was not appropriate for his congregation. Verse-by-verse exposing of Scripture seemed far too complex and deep for his blue-collar church of many young believers. Instead, he usually practices topical preaching in which he teaches about different theological concepts or modern issues using the biblical synopsis of the topic. While the pastor is burdened for his congregation and sensitive to their needs, he is missing one important point: expositional preaching is not more difficult to understand than topical. The exposition of narrative is perhaps the clearest example of how exposition can be understandable, easy to follow, and powerful. Stories can be used to teach every culture, education level, social class. The stories of the Bible can be captivating in their telling and convicting in their

¹¹ John McArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishers, 1982), 23-24.

explanation.¹² Pastors can reach uneducated or spiritually immature audiences more seamlessly with the use of biblical narratives.

While topical preaching may seem like an effective philosophy, the stories of the Bible often challenge this way of thinking. When a preacher attempts to use a story to support his topic or preaching point, he consistently runs into a couple homiletical errors. Misuses of the narrative waste the narrative's power and a lack of emphasis on the Triune God who is the center of every story.

The Illustration-Only Error

Since the nature of topical preaching consists of collecting various portions of Scripture, narratives are often included in the topical collections. For instance, the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 is often a go-to passage for an illustration when preaching on lust and sexual purity. When a preacher arranges the elements of his sermon (how he will present the collection), the narrative sections often are defined as the illustrations offered after a major point is revealed. First, it is important to note that using a biblical narrative as an illustration is not an inappropriate or unbiblical thing to do. Tom Farrell advocates, "The first place to look for quality illustrations is obviously the Bible itself. The Lord Jesus in His preaching made frequent reference to the Old Testament. He often quoted the patriarchs and the prophets and reminded His hearers of historical events from the Scriptures."¹³ Stephen, Paul and other New Testament preachers also used the stories of old to support their teachings about Christ (Acts 7: 2-47, 10:42, 13:17-23). God's Word is self-supporting and complimentary. The preacher can and should often

¹² Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 132.

¹³ Tom Farrell, *Preaching that Pleases God* (Lancaster, CA: Striving Together, 2010), 79-80.

use narrative passages of Scripture when preaching from other genres. The error topical preaching exposes is when illustrating becomes the only platform for narrative in the sermon. When preaching topically, the story is rarely the primary text, and even then, the sermon has no intense focus on the narrative because of extraneous verses and points. The topical sermon struggles to serve the narrative with justice because of the lack of devotion to the importance of the story itself.

The Main-Character Error

Another common error that topical preaching creates is in neglecting Christ as the main Character in the stories of the Bible. In Luke 24, Jesus was speaking with two men on the road to Emmaus. In their conversation, Jesus began to explain how the Scriptures all spoke of the Messiah. Luke 24:27 reads, “Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.” Jesus taught that all of God’s Word speaks of Him. Therefore, God is the main character and focus of all the Bible. Christ must be revealed in all of His fullness throughout the Scripture. Graeme Goldsworthy expresses how imperative knowing Christ is to the body of Christ, saying, “They [the congregation] cannot mature if they do not know the Christ in the Bible, the Christ to whom the whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, give a unified and inspired testimony.”¹⁴

Ultimately, every passage of Scripture is about the redeeming God of Heaven. Even though Joshua, Ruth, Nehemiah, and Esther each have entire books of the Bible written about their lives and actions, these characters are all arrows pointing to the true

¹⁴ Graeme Goldsworthy, “Biblical Theology as the Heartbeat of Effective Ministry,” in *Biblical Theology*, ed. Scott J. Hafemann (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 286.

Hero of each of their stories. Consider Esther: her story is not simply about having boldness to step out of a comfort zone. The greater picture of Esther is about the faithful God of deliverance who keeps his promises to His people.¹⁵

Every Christian sermon, including those based on Old Testament narrative, should proclaim the saving work of God. Throughout the Bible, the Lord carries out one beautiful story of redemption.¹⁶ All biblical narratives fit somewhere in the grand narrative of Scripture that culminates in the saving work of Christ.¹⁷ Gary Millar summarized the Scripture's completion in Christ, saying, "Ultimately, our *interest*, and our *goal* and our *intention*, is to make our way from anywhere in the Old Testament back towards life in Christ."¹⁸

Accurately preaching narrative passages of the Bible requires expositional preaching. While topical preaching can use the stories as part of its model, many weaknesses of the approach hold back the topical preacher from utilizing the narrative to its fullest intent. When a narrative is proclaimed through exposition, it can have liberty to move freely in the original and intended form and emphasis.

The Exegesis of Narratives

When a preacher encounters a narrative passage, his process of preaching the message can be broken down into two steps: the exegesis of the passage and the

¹⁵ John A. Martin, "Esther," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 700.

¹⁶ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), 276.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gary Millar and Phil Campbell, *Saving Eutychus* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2013), 89.

presentation of the passage. The exegesis stage includes studying the text, discovering what truths it holds, and discerning what message God speaks through the story that needs to be proclaimed to the people.¹⁹ Presentation focuses on finding the most effective way to display the truths discovered in the exegesis to the hearers of the sermon. Chuck Swindoll alludes to this process when he states, “Anything you say must be built upon truth or your words will have no lasting impact.”²⁰ A preacher must discover the inspired truth through accurate interpretation before he is ready to build a sermon on the foundational message of the text. Narratives must be interpreted in a unique way. Haddon Robinson stated, “When working in narrative literature, we seldom have to word through a maze of complex grammatical relationships, but instead we derive the author’s meaning from a broad study of several paragraphs.”²¹ Anyone who reads a narrative must understand four distinctive qualities of biblical narrative as they embark to discover the eternal truths, principles, and lessons these great stories hold. These four aspects are the power of narrative, the elements of narrative, the movement of narrative, and the subgenres of narrative.

The Power of Narrative

Perhaps the most common of Aesop’s Fables is “The Tortoise and the Hare.” Though many people know the story, many probably do not recall the first time they heard the story. The common tale of the animals’ footrace may have been heard as a

¹⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 125.

²⁰ Charles R. Swindoll, *Saying It Well: Touching Others with Your Words* (New York: FaithWords, 2012), 93.

²¹ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 41-42.

bedtime story or read from a storybook. Regardless of how the story was presented, the moral of the story is unforgettable from its first hearing: slow and steady wins the race.²² While the recollection and application of this timeless truth may vary, the connection of the story to the precept is inseparable. The reason this fable's teaching is so powerful and memorable is because of its attachment to a simple story. "The Tortoise and the Hare" is only one example of how powerful stories can be.

The God of Heaven was never ignorant of the power that stories held. This is evident through His choosing to communicate eternal truth through the means of stories. He spoke through the pens of godly men through the ages, recording the events and lives through which He showed His glory. A large portion of the Bible is filled with narratives about prophets, kings, apostles, and lonely nomads that trusted in or rejected God. One of the primary reasons much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, was recorded as stories was because of the memorability of stories. Rudyard Kipling once profoundly stated, "If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten."²³ God, in His perfect wisdom, understood that in an illiterate society, communicating His Word through stories would increase its expansion and preservation. However, these stories are not simply historical records or campfire tales. Each writing holds eternal, edifying truth about the Creator of the universe.

When reflecting on the mind-probing power of stories, Anthony de Mello said, "A lost coin is found by means of a penny candle; the deepest truth is found by means of a

²² Aesop and Janet Stevens, *The Tortoise and the Hare: An Aesop Fable* (New York: Holiday House, 1984).

²³ "Rudyard Kipling," American Society of Authors and Writers, last modified 2006, accessed August 2, 2016, <http://amsaw.org/amsaw-ithappenedinhistory-123004-kipling.html>.

simple story.”²⁴ God chose to reveal the deepest truth about Himself through the use of stories. His stories are the most powerful tales heard or read by man. The Bible as a whole unit contains the greatest story ever told: the story of the redeeming Messiah. The gracious Lord has given the church access to the timeless narratives in the Bible. Those who preach in the church must be good stewards of the power of biblical narrative, utilizing the impact of the stories as God intended.

The Elements of Narrative

To accurately interpret biblical narrative, one must first gain a comprehensive understanding of the essential materials used to build every story. Meaning is primarily communicated through these four storytelling elements: setting, characters, plot, and narration.²⁵

Setting

Every story begins with some amount of background information. The information necessary in a setting may include the location or time period where the story begins, a significant event in a character’s past, or the relationships between certain characters. Biblical narrative will often include simple yet important details to the setting of its stories. These small bits of information include geographical details and time factors. Many of Jesus’ parables were expressed through the setting of a heated preceding discussion. Sometimes, setting details may seem insignificant, but Robert Chisholm explains, “Physical setting can have symbolic value and contribute to the story’s

²⁴ “Anthony de Mello on Truth,” Monasteries of the Heart, last modified 2011, accessed August 2, 2016, <https://www.monasteriesoftheheart.org/monks-our-midst/anthony-de-mello-truth>.

²⁵ Steven Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, 41-43.

theme.”²⁶ A diligent student of the Scripture will examine the setting of the story to determine the divine significance of inspired details.

In addition to the clear description of the setting, biblical narratives each rest uniquely in a larger setting of the grand story of redemption. Chisholm also avowed, “To understand fully the significance of a narrative one must examine its placement within the larger whole of which it is part.”²⁷ Each story must also be read in context of the redemptive narrative of the whole Bible.²⁸ Old Testament narratives were written in an era where there was not full knowledge of God’s plan, according to Ephesians 3:4-5. The heroes of faith in these timeless stories lived by faith from a different perspective than the apostles and the church today. Nevertheless, each narrative contributes to the greater story of the Author of the Bible. When exegeting a biblical narrative, close attention should be given to understanding the immediate and wider context in which the story unfolds.

Characters

From the troubled and mysterious Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, to the boy who wanted never to grow up in J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, characters are the element of a story which most powerfully seizes the audience. The characters of stories never fail to captivate, bewilder, inspire, or disgust all who listen to their tales. The personalities and actions of characters each contribute to the overall effect and

²⁶ Robert Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 151.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁸ J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 45-46.

message of the story they inhabit.²⁹ Biblical characters have a relational advantage over fictional characters because they lived real lives in real places on the map.

In order to interpret the meaning of events and actions in the Bible, a reader must first gain an understanding of the characters who are involved. Authors develop characters by several means. One obvious method through which personalities are unveiled is through direct description. If a person is identified as a “harlot” (Joshua 2:1) or as a “man of God” (1 Kings 13:1), the reader immediately has an idea of what that character is like, at least on the surface. However, according to Robert Alter, detailed description of individuals is purposefully absent. He writes, “All the indicators of nuanced individuality to which Western Literary tradition has accustomed us...would appear to be absent from the Bible.”³⁰ Biblical narrative only gives sparse description of its subjects. Steven Mathewson claims, “The scarcity of detailed description makes it significant when it does occur.”³¹ For instance, the descriptions of Ehud as left-handed and Eglon as obese contribute to the assassination story in Judges 3.³² Bible students must pay close attention to details such as these.

The other primary means of characterization is through the words and actions of the characters. Mathewson also asserts, “Generally, the biblical narrators show us rather than tell us. Thus, interpreters get insight into a character’s nature by paying attention to his or her actions.”³³ People’s behavior and words reveal their hearts and personalities.

²⁹ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 57.

³⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Perseus Books Group, 2011), 143.

³¹ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 61.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

Proverbs 28:1 reads, “The wicked flee when no one is pursuing, but the righteous are bold as a lion.” The behavior of these two groups in a time of distress would reveal the condition of their hearts. The Bible often reveals the faith and righteousness of individuals through their commendable acts of faith. Jesus also exposed this truth: “...for the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34). The characters’ dialogue, exclamation, and poetry peels back their personage like layers of an onion. To discover the heart and soul of a biblical character, their every word and deed must be scrutinized until their core is exposed.³⁴ Because characterization is often a lengthy process, Steven Smith suggests, “While character development is essential to the story, it can be communicated in the same way that the biblical authors do so, through use of plot development. In the sermon, allow the characters to emerge as the story emerges.”³⁵

Plot

Characters are useless to a storyteller if they do not take some sort of action. A plot is a series of events which carries the story from beginning to conclusion. These events must be intensely dissected in biblical narrative because often authors give little information on anything external to the plot. An exceptional plot is fundamental to any powerful story. Shimon Bar-Efrat, an Israeli scholar, brilliantly expressed, “The plot serves to organize events in such a way as to arouse the reader’s interest and emotional involvement, while at the same time imbuing the events with meaning.”³⁶ The Author of

³⁴ Ibid., 64-65

³⁵ Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God: Shaping Sermons Like Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2015), 42.

³⁶ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1989), 93.

the Scripture divinely organized each narrative to be relatable, inspiring, and saturated with eternal truth.

The actions of biblical characters are what give Christians motivating examples of living the life of faith.³⁷ Each biblical hero experienced an internal change from God, but they each lived out their faith through unique plots. In the book of Daniel, a determination to live for God in a pagan society was not a light decision for Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. An exposition of these characters suggests they acted out their faith by facing threatening kings, a fiery furnace, and a den of lions. The conflicts and victories of these men display the power of God working in faithful servants. The plots of these breathtaking stories give memorable impact far beyond their declaration of faith. In the New Testament, James 2:15 offers insight on the subject of taking action on faith: “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.” Only through victories and deeds of faith can the true power of faith and salvation be communicated. As faith without works is dead, characters with no plot are dead also.

Plot structure and development will be discussed shortly. One last truth to remember is, “the plot is the story line and not the theme. The plot facilitates the end of the story, which leads to the theme.”³⁸ Knowledge of the stories themselves does not lead to spiritual growth unless the eternal truth is derived from the plot.

³⁷ Trevin Wax, *Gospel-Centered Teaching: Showing Christ in All the Scripture* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2013), 46.

³⁸ Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, 42.

Narration

The last major element of narratives is their narration. Simply put, the narrator is the voice telling the story. Robert Alter states, “Narration is thus often relegated to the role of confirming assertions made in the dialogue...with an explanatory gloss.”³⁹ In most cases, biblical narration is accomplished in third person, as an outside perspective looking into the story. Only a few exceptions to this constant exist, the most prominent of which is the book of Nehemiah where the author tells his story in first person.⁴⁰ Steven Smith offers insight on biblical narration, saying, “Narration is extremely helpful in narrative since the narrator is telling us, out of all the details that exist, the ones that especially need our attention. This is helpful in biblical narrative for the reason that the biblical narrators are inspired by God.”⁴¹ Biblical authors, through the given words of God, present biblical narratives in their perfected form with no extraneous or excluded information. Each detail is included intentionally and is relevant in some way to the overall effect of God’s story. These details should all be addressed to the extent of their significance in the story, not overemphasizing or diminishing any information.

An interpreter must pay close attention to the narrator’s point of view. This concept is known as focalization.⁴² Sometimes, the narrator reveals parts of the story as the characters discover them. In other situations, the author will use external focalization, disclosing information hidden from the characters.⁴³ A notable example of this is in John

³⁹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 82.

⁴⁰ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 74.

⁴¹ Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, 42.

⁴² Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 73.

⁴³ Ibid.

6:71 when the author reveals that Judas will be the disciple who betrays Christ. A dedicated student of the Scripture must recognize the context of the original author as he narrates the story.⁴⁴

At other times, the narrator will offer explanations to cultural or language barriers or theological insights. An example of an author's explanation is seen in Mark 5 when Jesus raises a young girl from the dead. In verse 41, Jesus exclaimed, "'Talitha kum!' (which translated means, 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!')." Mark's explanation of this phrase was offered by his decision through inspiration.⁴⁵ Similarly, a theological insert from the narrator is given by Moses in Genesis 2:24, where he writes, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." This side statement in the creation story gives insight to the point which God was communicating through the description of the creation of woman. God included this element of the creation story to establish the doctrine of marriage and He communicated that truth through Moses' narration.

A preacher must understand the context of the narrator when interpreting the meaning of a passage. The inspired storytellers of the Bible each offer unique depth to the meaning of God's stories. The narrator's style and person influence both the exegesis and proclamation of the narrative.

The Movement of Narrative

While every narrative is unique, each story has remarkable similarities with the next. The most common similarity among narratives is in the form, movement, and plot

⁴⁴ J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 149-150.

⁴⁵ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 72.

structure of stories. Regardless of genre, all narratives follow a similar pattern of movement through the plot. Bedtime stories, Charles Dickens' novels, and biblical narratives all contain universal types of development that compose the events of the story. There are two models that best represent this common thread among plot movements. Each will be shown and explained for a better understanding of biblical narratives.

The first model for narrative plot flow is derived from the lectures of Dr. J. Tyler Scarlett. His concept of narrative movement takes the shape of a mountain. Every story begins with a set-up or situation which gives the audience curiosity. The stress of a story occurs when the primary crisis, opposition, infirmity, or sin is introduced. All stories move from the stress to a

search. The search contains any events in which the characters try and fail to resolve the stress. As the

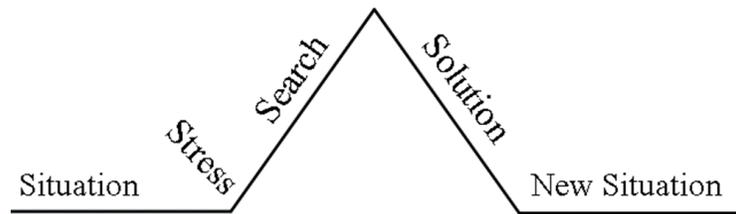


Figure 1. Scarlett's Model of Narrative Plot Flow.

search builds, the characters of the story approach a critical mountain-peak point from which the solution will flow. The solution's purpose is to resolve the original stress. Solving the stress does not always unfold in a happy or predictable manner, but every story ends with a new situation, re-stabilized from the initial stress of the story.⁴⁶

Each step of the universal plot movement can be seen in the story of Samson. The situation of Samson's chronicle begins with the Nazarite vow God bestowed on him. In expositing this story, one may suggest that his vow is the key aspect of the situation that

⁴⁶ J. Tyler Scarlett, "PLED 421, Homiletics."

affects the entire story. For Samson, the stress moment occurs in the first verses of Judges 14. The Bible's first information about Samson's adult life concerns his desire to marry a Gentile woman. His sinful demand to wed a pagan displays the overarching stress of the story: Samson wanted to serve his fleshly desires instead of serving God. Samson's search revealed the withering away of his vow and dedication to the Lord. He began to accomplish his mission (destroying the Philistines) in frustration for personal gain. The Nazarite vow he had made to the Lord broke apart fragment by fragment. Blinded and bound by his sins, he eventually surrendered the secret of his hair to a harlot. The search of Samson's story is devastating, especially as the mountain peaks at his blinding and enslavement. The solution is hinted as the author mentions how Samson's hair began to grow again. Crying out to God in faith for the power to destroy the house of the Philistines brought resolution not only to the oppression of the Philistines on Israel, but also to the hardness of Samson's heart toward his Lord. Since the solution required Samson's death, the new situation is quite brief. However, Samson ultimately accomplished his God given mission of delivering Israel. He perished, not in sin and shame, but as a patriarch of faith (Hebrews 11:32).

Eugene Lowry is an author and pastor who has written on the topic of narrative form. He presents a unique model for plot movement and sermon development in his book *The Homiletical Plot*. Instead of approaching narratives as a mountain to be ascended and descended, Lowry illustrates narrative with a downward loop, shown in the following figure:

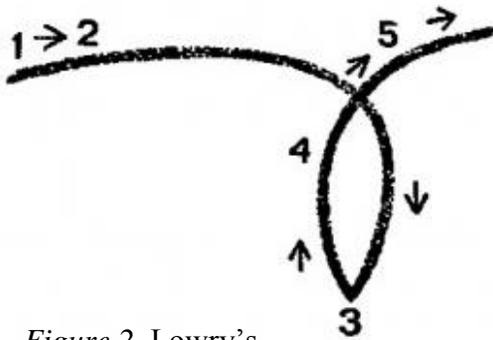


Figure 2. Lowry's Model of Narrative Plot Flow.

1. Upsetting the Equilibrium (Oops!)
2. Analyzing the Discrepancy (Ugh!)
3. Disclosing the Clue to Restoration (Aha!)
4. Experiencing the Gospel (Whee!)
5. Anticipating the Consequences (Yeah!)⁴⁷

Lowry commences the development of a story

with the presentation of the crisis or stress. "Upsetting the equilibrium" is the terminology he uses to describe the proposition of the problem. Grabbing the audience's attention is the function of the first step. In the second stage, Lowry shows the struggle and inability of humanity to resolve the stress. Similar to Scarlett's *search*, analyzing the discrepancy usually monopolizes most of the content of a narrative or sermon.⁴⁸ As the narrative transitions to the third stage, it discloses the clue to resolution, although resolution has not yet been attained. This moment often occurs when the protagonist discovers the plan and cost to resolve the stress.⁴⁹ Lowry introduces the fourth step as his time to clearly bring the gospel into view for each sermon and narrative. The clue to restoration in step three will always reveal the gospel in some way, ushering in Christ's provision as the resolution. Lastly, Lowry teaches that the settled state of an ending narrative reveals the eternal truth and call to action. In the preaching of a narrative, as in any great literature, he asks heart-probing questions in step five to elicit a response to the truth from the audience.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon As Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1980), 25.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

Not only does Lowry use this model to interpret narratives, but he also uses the five stages to shape all of his sermons. His approach steps away from expositional preaching, forcing every epistle, psalm, and discourse into a narrative sermon model. His adamant belief in the power of stories has driven him to preach every sermon text as a narrative. His philosophy does not properly respect varying genres of Scripture. While his entire approach to preaching is not ideal, his depiction of how all narratives function is immensely valuable in the interpretation and preaching of narratives. While *The Homiletical Plot* does not offer an adequate sermon model for all biblical texts, Lowry's method is an extremely effective model for preaching narrative passages.⁵¹

When interpreting narrative passages, one must wonder why these models are useful. Understanding how narratives flow and develop is key to discovering the eternal truth they contain. There are at least three important principles of narrative movements that increase the accuracy of narrative exegesis for preaching: looking for the big idea, viewing details as parts of the whole, and placing narratives in their larger contexts.

Look for the Big Idea

Both Scarlett's and Lowry's models teach that narratives function around a common idea or theme. In biblical narrative, teaching points can be found in any and all of the 5 steps presented in either model. However, when organizing a sermon, the speaker must sufficiently emphasize the primary theme of the entire passage and book. Instead of gathering a collection of disconnected points, a preacher should elevate the overarching theme of the text to be the encompassing, connecting theme of the sermon. The theme

⁵⁰ Ibid., 69-69.

⁵¹ Ibid.

may be revealed from the beginning of the story, or it may be reserved for the peaking moment when the clue to restoration is disclosed. Finding the big idea of a narrative is not always an easy task. Steven Mathewson understands the struggle, writing, “One of the most challenging stages in the interpretive process is identifying the story’s exegetical idea.”⁵² The theological strand weaved through the text should direct most of the effort of the interpreter.

View Details as Parts of a Whole

When examining a passage, the temptation is often to focus on the details and intricacies of a story. Facts, customs, measurements, attributes, and other details can make a sermon swollen and sluggish. While details are not unimportant or less inspired than other parts of the story, they serve a specific purpose to carry the movement of the story along with the theme. Steven Smith, claiming that “the facts serve the themes,” wisely wrote, “The authors of Old Testament narratives have a theme that transcends the historical details. As we read a text, we may really want to know how the details of the text are reconciled with the rest of the story...the satisfaction for the student of the Scriptures lies in finding how the author was using these details to accomplish his purposes.”⁵³ When examining passages by their narrative movements, the details fit into their proper place of supporting the flow and theme of a passage. A preacher must balance his inclusion and emphasis of details as the original author deemed fit and

⁵² Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 81.

⁵³ Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, 44.

according to their relation to the overarching theme. To quote Mathewson, “The trick is to strike a balance between economy and detail.”⁵⁴

Place Narratives in Their Larger Contexts

Every story in the Bible is surrounded by other stories. No story stands alone in the Scripture without being affected by others. The conglomeration and connection of the sixty-six books can often be overwhelming. However, when tackling a specific narrative, the interpreter must pay close attention to the surrounding context of the book containing the story. Consider 1 Samuel 24 when David slices off a portion of Saul’s robe. A reader would have a difficult time understanding the nuances and themes of this story without a knowledge of the intensifying rivalry and jealousy in Saul’s heart or David’s struggles under Saul’s pursuit.⁵⁵ Richard Schultz states, “The meaning of a given verse is not exclusively determined by the words it contains and their interrelationships but rather by the immediate and larger context that surrounds it. Ignoring the literary context can lead interpreters to misunderstand and therefore misuse a text.”⁵⁶ When exegeting a story, the surrounding stories need to be examined to extract information and themes that influence a particular passage.

Subsequently, the preacher must evaluate the position of a distinct passage in the grand story of redemption. The story of salvation from Genesis to Revelation uses each section and genre of Scripture uniquely to accomplish a greater purpose of God’s

⁵⁴ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 132.

⁵⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 84.

⁵⁶ Richard L. Schultz, *Out of Context: How to Avoid Misinterpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 42.

revelation to man.⁵⁷ Trevin Wax warns of teaching the stories of the Bible individually, saying, “If you teach the Bible as if it is a collection of stand-alone tales, your people will never see how these stories connect to tell the big story of salvation through Jesus Christ.”⁵⁸ Wax also stated, “Most scholars divide the story line into four movements: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.”⁵⁹ These movements form the mighty mountain of the redemption narrative. Each individual narrative stands as a lesser foothill on the larger mount. With every biblical narrative, context has to be addressed to accurately preach truth and salvation from every text.

The Subgenres of Narrative

While a large portion of the Bible is composed of narrative, this broad genre can be dissimilated into more specific categories. The Scriptures were written throughout many time periods and cultures. Therefore, each subgenre of narrative must be approached slightly differently. The context and purposes of the various subgenres illuminate the unique truths communicated in the individual situations.

Old Testament Historical Narrative

When opening the Bible to an Old Testament narrative, a reader must keep three simple concepts in mind. The first guideline to exegesis of this subgenre is to bridge the large cultural gap.⁶⁰ The culture of the New Testament is not nearly as foreign to western preachers in the twenty-first century as the Old Testament. Also, as the time period is

⁵⁷ Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, 33.

⁵⁸ Trevin Wax, *Gospel-Centered Teaching*, 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 42-43.

extended farther from the present, narratives can be difficult to understand.⁶¹ A preacher who seeks to accurately present these narratives must do his homework. Studying the culture and differences of those days will clarify and deepen the impact of the story immensely, as pastors bridge the gap between the two cultures and times.

Another interesting aspect of Hebrew narratives specifically is their common lack of resolution. Steven Smith teaches, “There is a unique feature about Jewish narrative that is different. Jewish narrative does not always resolve the tension.”⁶² While all stories present a problem, struggle, and outcome, Jewish stories sometimes leave the audience without a “proper conclusion” as western culture would understand it. A prominent example of this phenomenon is found in the story of Jonah.⁶³ After the people of Nineveh turn to the Lord, Jonah continues his bad attitude after his shading plant dies. God then rebukes Jonah for his lack of compassion. The end. Nothing is written about Jonah’s response, feelings, or journey home. Naturally, the western audience waits for the book to say, “And Jonah lived miserably ever after,” or to give any resolution. This Jewish writing style must be addressed and understood when determining the main theme of a passage, because the teaching is often exposed as the story suddenly terminates. Preachers can utilize the curtness of the story’s conclusion to emphasize the punching point.⁶⁴

The most important interpretive principle to follow when handling Old Testament Narrative is that the Old Testament is interpreted by the New Testament. Likewise, the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, 43.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Old Testament is the foundation on which the New Testament is built. Smith offers valuable wisdom in this regard when he writes, “So much of what the New Testament teaches about theology is dependent upon the Old Testament narratives. Therefore, when we come to an Old Testament text that is mentioned in the New Testament, we must allow the New Testament to interpret this text for us.”⁶⁵ While the New Testament offers direct theological teachings, the Old Testament is a historical theology. Similar principles and teachings are contained in both testaments, with the New Testament developing and clarifying the teaching of the Old Testament. Also, the theologies of Christ and redemption are also revealed through Old Testament stories. Gary Millar expresses the need to preach Christ from the Old Testament as he writes, “Being committed to preaching the gospel from the Old Testament means that I must understand how this text is affected by the coming of Christ (as well as how this particular text launches us towards Christ...). But once I understand the gospel influence, I’m keen to know how the text is going to shape and inform my (Christian) life.”⁶⁶ Christian preachers need to preach the gospel of redemption in every sermon from either testament. The theologies of both testaments are beautifully intertwined. Preaching of Old Testament narratives should emphasize the theological teaching as reflected in the entire Bible.

Gospel Narrative

Like Old Testament narratives, the stories found in the gospels are equally unique as a subgenre. The gospels were written to record and reveal Jesus Christ. His character and personhood is displayed through the many events and teaching recorded in the four

⁶⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁶ Gary Millar and Phil Campbell, *Saving Eutychus*, 84.

accounts. Any reader can immediately decipher that Christ is central to the gospel stories and that understanding and remembering Him is the purpose of the writings.

Two important interpretive rules apply uniquely to the gospels as a subgenre. First, a gospel book is not synonymous with a biography. While the gospels contain events from much of Jesus' life, they are not biographies. Scott Duval and Daniel Hays explain, "Unlike most modern biographies, the Gospels do not cover the whole life of Jesus, but rather jump from his birth to his public ministry."⁶⁷ When studying the life of Christ, a preacher must realize that he does not have access to the entire life of Jesus, but only possesses that which God saw fit to preserve for our understanding. The Apostle John mentions this fact as he closes his account. John 21:25 reads, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written." God's revelation of His Son is divinely complete while not being extensive.

Since the four gospel volumes are not biographies, they also are not arranged sequentially. Duval and Hays explain, "Often the writers of the Gospels arrange Jesus' actions topically rather than chronologically and report what Jesus says in a variety of ways."⁶⁸ This explains why events are presented in different orders in the various accounts. The stories and lessons Jesus taught are usually organized according to theme. When reading difficult narrative passages in the gospels, often the themes of the surrounding stories and teachings can help determine the overarching theme of the section.

⁶⁷ J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 270.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Church History Narrative

The book of Acts uniquely describes the birth and expansion of the church after Jesus' ascension. No other narrative book deals with the subject matter or time period of this second volume of Luke's chronicle. An important note to remember in the reading of Acts is to determine which practices and events in the church were descriptive and which were prescriptive. In some cases, God worked through men in special ways in unique situations. Other passages outline how God expects the church to function regularly. Distinguishing the two purposes with wisdom is vital to accurate interpretation of these narratives.

The context and development of the stories from Jerusalem out into the surrounding world needs to be recognized and utilized. For a greater understanding of the flow of the book of Acts, see Appendix 1. A last invaluable aspect of Acts is how it places most of Paul's epistles into the biblical narrative. Each letter can be deeply enriched by knowledge of Paul's journeys and struggles. The narratives in the book of Acts are irreplaceably important for the purpose of edifying, instructing, and inspiring the church.

Parables

The parable genre is perhaps the most unique of all narrative subgenres. A parable is a story or illustration that is used to relate and convey messages to all common receivers.⁶⁹ Jesus often communicated through fictional stories to impact hearers in unique ways. Robert Stein expounds, "Parables not only communicate information, they

⁶⁹ Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 9-10.

also disarm and persuade. It is not easy to resist the message of a parable.”⁷⁰ The parables each teach eternal truth without portraying real situations. A wise interpreter must approach the parables seeking to determine the original purpose of the illustration, not to fabricate allegorical antecedents of every element of the parable.

The Old Testament holds a few parables in its pages. While most of the inspired parables were spoken by Christ, other authors used the same literary mechanism to communicate truth. Proverbs contains many short illustrations and abbreviated stories, the most extended of which is found in Proverbs 7 concerning the danger of the harlot. Another Old Testament parable was implemented by Nathan in his confrontation to David. After exposing the king with the parable of the poor man’s lamb, he interpreted his story, pronouncing, “You are the man!” Regardless of the location of a parable in Scripture, the truth within these narratives is intentionally encrypted. Jesus knew many people would not understand his teaching when he claimed, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand,” (Luke 8:10). Understanding parables requires faith, humility, and listening to the Holy Spirit to comprehend Christ’s purposes for teaching through these stories.

The Presentation of Narratives

Once the exegesis of a narrative is complete, the preacher faces the second challenge: preaching the eternal truth of the narrative in an accurate, biblical, and relevant manner. Fortunately, the preacher is working with a powerful tool. Since stories are engaging and effective teaching aids, the preacher can utilize the story to communicate

⁷⁰ Robert H. Stein, *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 48.

the beautiful truth within. As previously discussed, a narrative sermon should be shaped like a narrative text. Therefore, a sermon outline for a narrative passage should include the same elements: setting, stress, development, and resolution.⁷¹

Setting the Stage

When preaching from a narrative text, the speaker has to, in a sense, give a double introduction. While the story to follow needs a setting and background information, it is difficult to step up to the pulpit and start into a narrative. Most listeners are not ready for the first words from the preacher to be, “Once upon a time, two brothers were fishing on the Sea of Galilee.” The whole narrative needs a thematic introduction. First, introduce the theme of the sermon, then introduce the story of the sermon.⁷²

The initial introduction of a sermon is perhaps the most important part of the sermon. Tom Farrell writes about the importance of the introduction: “The introduction makes the first impression, and we all realize that the first impression is usually of critical importance. The preacher is either helped or handicapped here.”⁷³ The first words out of the preacher’s mouth must be engaging, building a bridge between preacher and listener. However, these words should not be unsubstantial fluff pinned on the opening of the sermon. Farrell realizes, “The introduction must establish the direction and destination of the sermon.”⁷⁴ With a narrative passage, the opening statements should illuminate the pathway on which the narrative will tread. In contrast to Farrell’s statement, the precursor to a narrative should not reveal the destination of the narrative. The story will lose its

⁷¹ J. Tyler Scarlett, “PLED 421, Homiletics.”

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Tom Farrell, *Preaching that Pleases God*, 107.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

suspense and impact if the lesson is unmasked before the story even embarks.⁷⁵ Rather, open with a short tale, humorous line, word picture, or intriguing statement that contains the stressing theme, not the resolving theme.⁷⁶ An example of this approach would be to introduce the story of Peter and Cornelius with comments about the ever-unresolved racial tension in the United States.⁷⁷ Do not immediately unveil that the gospel is impartial to race and offered freely to all people. The revelation of the main point is preserved for much later. Simply present the problem without the solution. “Upset the equilibrium,” as Eugene Lowry would word it.⁷⁸ This method will seize the interest of the audience without disclosing the moral of the story.

Secondly, the preacher needs to prepare the audience for the narrative by explaining the setting of the story. If preaching through a book of the Bible, giving a quick recap of the previous messages can be beneficial. If preaching a stand-alone message, explain the context of where a passage fits in the course of Scripture. Then begin addressing the location and characters prominent to the story. Reading the verses introducing the story is fundamental to engage the congregation with the Word of God. The people need to see that the facts and details of the introduction come from the Scripture. As the preacher sets the stage, he essentially retells what the Word says in the corresponding section of narrative. At this moment, the preacher must arm himself with storytelling skills. While the stories of the Bible are engaging and powerful on their own,

⁷⁵ J. Tyler Scarlett, “PLED 421, Homiletics.”

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Jeremy Ryan, “Acts 10,” a student presentation in PLED 421, Liberty University, Fall 2015.

⁷⁸ Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 28.

a boring or broken storyteller can ruin an exceptional story. Preachers must develop adequate storytelling skills so the inspired stories can effectively come to life.

The speaker should flow from the setting to the stress effortlessly. When presenting the crisis of the story, do not brashly pour out the big idea. Let the issue at hand brew to its fullest richness. A preacher must first build a connection between the original audience and contemporary audience. Chuck Swindoll stated, “I want individuals in my audience to see their own struggles reflected in the Text and to identify with the historical individuals in a poignantly personal way.”⁷⁹ While stories present a type of external stress, the internal, spiritual stress also needs to be exposed as it carries the theme from the characters to the congregation. In a sermon on healing, the hearers may never experience a physical healing from leprosy, but they can experience a spiritual cleansing of the soul.

Developing the Plot

After the crisis is adequately presented, the search for resolution begins. Description and analysis are the defining factors of a successful plot development.⁸⁰ As the preacher describes the adventures, struggles, and encounters of the characters, precise word choice is imperative to homiletical excellence. Often, writing out descriptions beforehand can improve the quality of the portrayal. A developed vocabulary is an invaluable tool for the preacher as long as he limits himself to the congregation’s level of understanding. The use of present tense verbs when telling a story assists in engaging the contemporary audience. An effective bridging technique to connect the original and

⁷⁹ Charles Swindoll, *Saying It Well*, 128-129.

⁸⁰ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 134-137.

modern audiences is to relate cultural items and events to modern customs and materials.⁸¹ The conversion of ancient monetary amounts to modern is the most common example of this practice, while the association of Joseph's coat of many colors with a relevant designer clothes company is more creative. Another effective means of connection between worlds can be describing the weather, people's emotions, and other constants in everyday terms. The objective of description is to involve and connect the audience to a story that occurred in a different time, culture, and location in an attempt toward relevance.⁸²

While the narrative sermon requires description, an effective sermon digs deeper than a simple retelling of the story. The analysis of a narrative takes the listener mining into the arcane caves of meaning and truth. Eugene Lowry is a firm advocate for narrative analysis, writing, "Unfortunately, the greatest single weakness of the average sermon is the weakness of diagnosis. What is lacking is concrete perceptive insight into the multifaceted ambiguities of the human situation..."⁸³ Addressing the thoughts, feelings, and spiritual needs of characters reveals the weightier issues in the story. Again, the physical crisis is only resolved by internal change of characters through the work of the Lord. These spiritual metamorphoses form the themes and teachings contained in the particular text. But remember to follow the narrative model. Withhold the drop of the big idea until the story reaches the climax. The audience should be waiting in anticipation for the eternal truth. Lowry teaches this concept, saying, "The congregation's attention is

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² J. Tyler Scarlett, "PLED 421, Homiletics."

⁸³ Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 38.

held not because they are enraptured with theology *per se*, but because the bind is not yet solved and there is therefore no option but to stay involved in the sermonic process.”⁸⁴

God’s Word is timeless and powerful. Even the well-known stories of Noah’s ark and David and Goliath can be brought to life through creative description and thoughtful analysis. An effective development of a narrative’s plot will engage and probe the souls of the listeners. The tension is built. Every ear and heart is prepared for the convicting, redeeming, and edifying truth to come.

Unveiling the Big Idea

As the narrative climbs to its zenith, the big idea of the sermon should be stated clearly. Tony Merida defines the big idea by writing, “The main point of the sermon is referred to often as the *proposition* or the *essence of the sermon in a sentence*.”⁸⁵ The preacher must bridge the gap between the original and modern audiences, exposing the meaning of the text in the form of an eternal theological principle. The big idea, when packaged efficiently, will be universal and applicable to all ages, races, cultures, and classes.⁸⁶ Saving the big idea for the critical moment is highly suggested for the purpose of audience engagement.⁸⁷ However, once the big idea has been unveiled, the preacher should repeat the statement to solidify it in the audience’s minds. The repetition of the main point will help the audience remember and internalize the principle.⁸⁸ After

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Tony Merida, *Faithful Preaching*, 80.

⁸⁶ J. Scott Duval and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word*, 45.

⁸⁷ J. Tyler Scarlett, “PLED 421, Homiletics.”

⁸⁸ Ibid.

adequately stating the proposition in a sentence, the preacher can communicate the idea through illustration, argumentation, and application.⁸⁹

Illustrating the big idea is an extremely effective way to solidify an idea into people's mind. Well-crafted illustrations can fuse a memorable story or word picture to a biblical concept. Merida adds that illustrations intensify meaning and inspire hearers.⁹⁰ An illustration only restates the big idea in a relatable, memorable way.

Argumentation is accomplished by presenting supportive information to increase credibility.⁹¹ Many people are skeptical of any objective teaching. The pastor should offer sufficient evidence and support to validate the main point of the sermon.⁹² The most reliable source of support for biblical principles is found in other passages of the Bible.⁹³ Often, truths found in narrative passages are reinforced either by statements in the epistles or by Christ Himself. Other sources of validation include quotes and researched evidence of the need or effectiveness of a principle. To validate the big idea, the preacher must answer the questions of "Is it true?" and "Can I believe it?"⁹⁴

The last step of unveiling the big idea is application. A preacher applies a principle by explaining how the principle is relevant to the hearers. David Helm determined the purpose of application by writing, "When it comes to application, the first

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Tony Merida, *Faithful Preaching*, 108.

⁹¹ J. Tyler Scarlett, "PLED 421, Homiletics."

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Tom Farrell, *Preaching that Pleases God* (Lancaster, CA: Striving Together, 2010), 79-80.

⁹⁴ Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 97.

thing to be said is that biblical expositors aim for a *change of heart*.⁹⁵ The purpose of biblical proclamation is to change people's lives. Application may include calling people to action, but it more importantly calls people to believe in the truth. Biblical principles can be applied in many different situations. A narrative frames a biblical truth in a specific context. The same truth can be applied in different ways to a modern context. The emphasis of application should be on believing the theological truth, not simply following a preacher's command.⁹⁶ Preaching that aims to change hearts inwardly will eventually produce outward fruit.

Preaching Christ, Not Characters

A vital element in any sermon is the presentation of the gospel message. Sermons given by Christian men in Christian churches must preach Christ's gospel. Tyler Scarlett once pointed out that no Jewish Rabbi should be able to comfortably nod his head throughout the entirety of a Christian sermon.⁹⁷ Jesus claimed the Old Testament spoke of Him (Luke 24:27). Old Testament narratives each contain a gospel theme and fit somewhere in the greater narrative of the whole Bible.⁹⁸ Therefore, all narrative sermons from the Old Testament should utilize the redemptive element of the passage to point directly to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are two consistent ways to preach the redemptive message of Jesus from narratives that do not directly involve His person. The first method is to look for a "New

⁹⁵ David Helm, *Expositional Preaching*, 102.

⁹⁶ J. Tyler Scarlett, "PLED 421, Homiletics."

⁹⁷ Trevin Wax, *Gospel-Centered Teaching*, 79.

⁹⁸ J. Tyler Scarlett, "PLED 446, Christocentric Preaching" (unpublished class notes, Liberty University, Fall 2016).

Testament explanatory parallel.”⁹⁹ The New Testament is filled with hundreds of references to Old Testament narrative that explain the intent of the stories in light of the gospel message. The book of Hebrews is filled with examples of how Old Testament characters and stories pointed to Christ. For example, Hebrews 11:26 connects the two testaments as the author speaks of Moses’ suffering. The verse reads, “considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.” Although Moses only looked forward to a nameless Messiah, he partook in the sufferings of Christ in his faithfulness to the Lord. Many New Testament passages unite Christ and Old Testament narratives, which gives contemporary preachers a straight pathway to the gospel message.

While the New Testament contains numerous Old Testament references, many narratives will have no direct, explained connection to Christ. In this case, a preacher should look for gospel themes in the passage. These elements include human depravity, faith, grace, redemption, and forgiveness, etc. The most common and reliable theme found in most passages is the condition of human sin, which shows the great need for the gospel.¹⁰⁰ Every story in the Bible displays at least one theme of the gospel as a pattern or shadow, which allows the proclaimer to clearly present the newly revealed message of salvation.¹⁰¹

When a preacher neglects to emphasize Christ in a sermon, he undermines God’s purpose of revelation through the Scripture. Narrative sermons that exclude the gospel

⁹⁹ Steven W. Smith, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 270-271.

¹⁰¹ J. Tyler Scarlett, “PLED 446, Christocentric Preaching.”

often teach moralism, exalting the characters of the story instead of Christ. Gideon, Joshua, and Ruth's successes only came through their reliance and trust in God. If these characters could tell their own stories, the God of salvation would be the prominent hero, not themselves. As the same stories are retold in modern pulpits, Christ ought to be uplifted, for He sovereignly orchestrated each story as the events occurred.

The ability to preach narrative passages of Scripture is a skill to be developed over time. The stories of the Bible should not be forced to conform to a three-point outline or standard teaching structure. Rather, the verse-by-verse exposition of a narrative will result in a flowing, developing, story-like sermon that engages the imagination of the listener. The preacher must pay close attention to the elements of narrative at play as the story unfolds. As the big idea emerges, the pastor must preserve the proposition for the perfect moment in the story. Once the text's connection to the gospel is revealed, the truth should be driven home by illustration, argumentation, and application.¹⁰²

The unforgettable stories of old remain powerful to this day. Each narrative in the Bible plays a part in the greatest story ever told: the story of redemption through Jesus Christ. The narratives contained in the Bible teach the eternal truths of God to all people. The responsibility of retelling the inspired stories has been entrusted to preachers who must stand up boldly to accurately proclaim biblical narratives in their intended form.

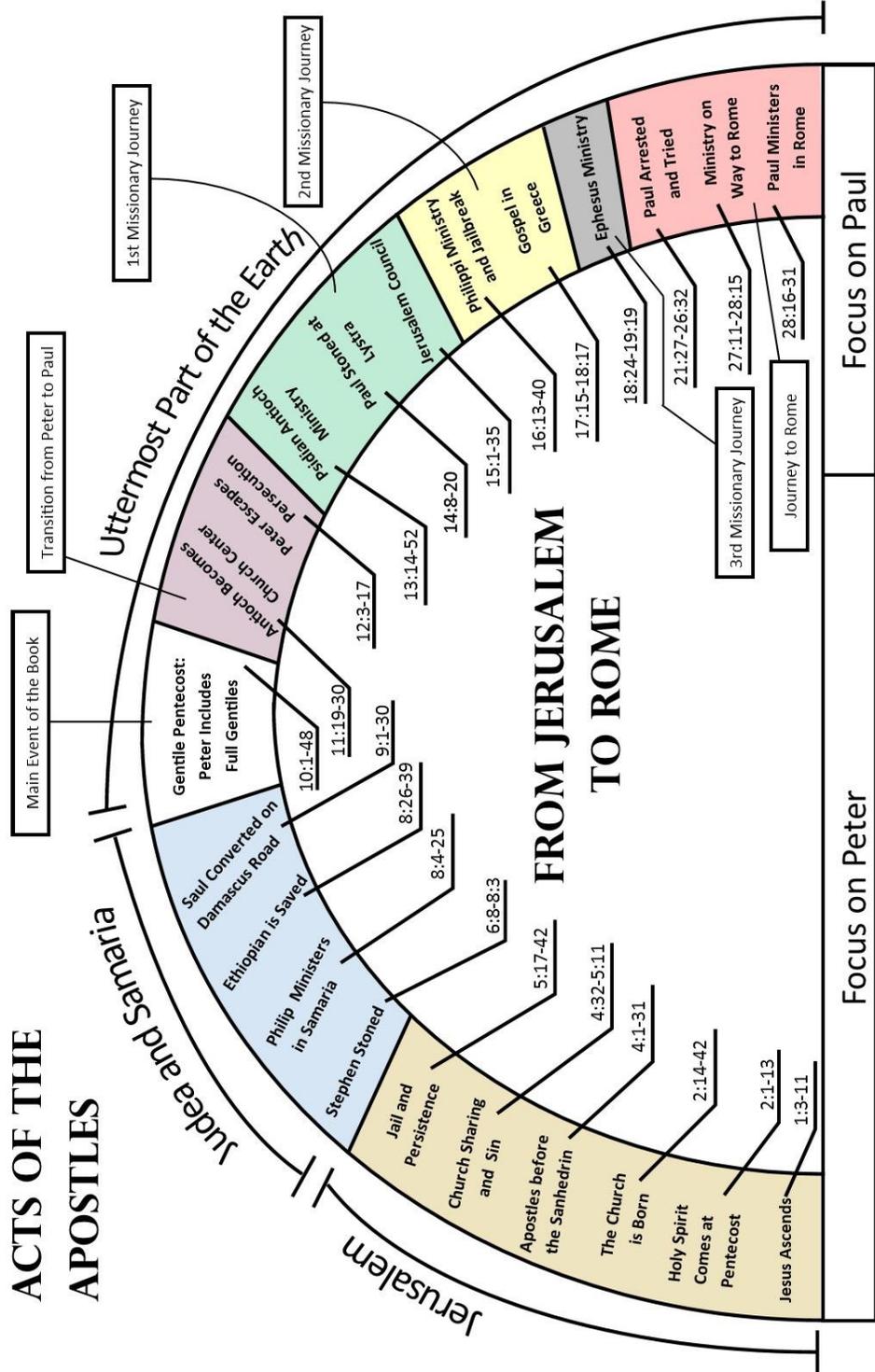
¹⁰² J. Tyler Scarlett, "PLED 446, Christocentric Preaching."

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Appendix



103

¹⁰³ Built using material from Michael J. Smith, "BIBL 364, Acts" (unpublished class notes, Liberty University, Fall 2015).