A STRATEGY FOR EFFECTIVENESS
IN PREACHING OLD TESTAMENT
NARRATIVE SCRIPTURE
REFERENCE
DO NOT CIRCULATE
A Thesis Project Submitted to
Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
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INMAN, SOUTH CAROLINA
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Dedicated to
my wonderful wife Kim,
whose portrait may be
viewed in Proverbs 31:10-31;
and to
my precious children
Ashley and Ryan
who are both a source
of great joy and inspiration
to their daddy!
ABSTRACT

A STRATEGY FOR EFFECTIVENESS IN PREACHING OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE SCRIPTURE

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Old Testament preaching appears to be on the decline. Very often when it is preached, it is done poorly. Since narratives comprise 40% of the Old Testament, a large portion of God’s Word is being either neglected or abused by many modern preachers. The purpose of this project is to show how proven hermeneutical and homiletical skills may be combined to provide a strategy for effectively preaching Old Testament narratives. The project will present a series of sermons based on the Old Testament book of Ruth which will demonstrate the author’s strategy as it is fleshed out in practical exposition.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Rationale for This Project

A Strategy for Effectiveness in Preaching Old Testament Narrative Scripture is a project which this author feels greatly inspired to explore. The compelling motives behind this Doctor of Ministry thesis-project are both professional and personal. These motivations are as follows:

First, Old Testament narratives comprise a major portion of the Bible. The Bible is the preacher’s textbook. He has no other God-given, infallible and authoritative source from which to preach “a word from the Lord.” When he opens this book he discovers that 77% of it is Old Testament and 40% of the Old Testament is in narrative form. Therefore, this project is focused on a portion of God’s Word which comprises nearly one-third of the scriptures. Such a large section of the Bible deserves special attention in a Doctor of Ministry project of this type.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, the young pastor in the Ephesus church, he


2 Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 73.
reminded him of the importance of the “Holy Scriptures” in his salvation as well as the fact that “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, . . .” (2 Tim. 3:16, NKJV)

Certainly the “Holy Scriptures” that Paul had in mind was indeed the only printed canon of scripture possessed by the church of that day—the Old Testament. This included what we know today as Old Testament narrative. Because Old Testament narrative is truly “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” as the inspired word of God, this project gives it special consideration.

Second, the Old Testament appears to be receiving very little attention in much contemporary preaching. In a recent perusal of material it was discovered that in one “preaching” publication (a publication from this author’s own denomination) covering a ten-year period, only 27% of its published sermons had an Old Testament text while 73% were New Testament based. In other words, 77% of the Bible is receiving only limited sermonic treatment by many contemporary preachers. This observation is quite interesting when viewed in the context of this author’s denominational position that Baptists are “a people of the Book.” “The Book” referred to is the Bible, Old Testament included!


4 Proclaim is a quarterly publication of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Lifeway Christian Resources. The author’s research involved a perusal of this publication’s quarterlies from a ten-year period (1988-1998).
In another perusal of books written for the purpose of helping preachers with weekly sermon preparation the author discovered additional evidence to support his concern. Several manuals published in the current year containing sample sermons to aid preachers showed a similar lack of attention in regards to the Old Testament. These manuals ranged from 15% to 35% in their use of Old Testament based sermons.  

The editor of one prominent homiletics journal lamented the fact that the Old Testament is being treated as “secondary in value” among evangelical preachers today. Even among evangelicals, the Old Testament is often treated as secondary in value when selecting texts for preaching. As editor of a professional journal for preachers, I annually receive hundreds of sermon manuscripts from ministers in a variety of Protestant denominations. Though the Old Testament makes up some two-thirds of the canon, less than one-tenth of the sermons submitted to Preaching are based on Old Testament texts.  

The author conducted a survey among pastors in his area to see if their preaching schedule over the previous year substantiated or invalidated this concern. The survey revealed that, on the average, most pastors questioned devoted 30% of their preaching schedule to Old Testament based texts.  

The bottom line in these observations is simply to point to the concern of the author

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7 The author conducted a telephone survey of fifteen area pastors reflecting a wide range of age, experience, education and denominational backgrounds.
that 77% of the Bible is receiving only limited attention by many contemporary preachers. While it is certainly natural for Christian preachers to gravitate to the New Testament, they must not neglect this large, rich portion of the Bible called the Old Testament.

Why do many preachers neglect this large section of God’s Word? Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., in his book Toward An Exegetical Theology, addresses this question but goes beyond it to address what is at stake in the whole issue. He writes:

Very little profit will come from attempting to fix the blame on one factor or another. We all have our own impressions and guesses: shortage of preparation time; topical, theological, and even so-called expository sermons which are jacks of all the texts on the subject and master of none; an exaggerated view of the discontinuity between the Testaments; or just plain old-fashioned laziness. Meanwhile, the crisis in evangelical practice grows to dangerous proportions—dangerous because the generation of interpreters that follows ours will level out their doctrine of Scripture to match our exegetical practice, and dangerous also because an enormous famine of the Word of God continues to exist in most evangelical churches. We have talked the Word of God without loosing that Word itself so that the power of God can be demonstrated to all.8

As Old Testament preaching suffers in general, so Old Testament narrative preaching declines in particular. Again, the issue of concern to the author is that three-quarters of God’s Word remains unheard and untaught to God’s people who desperately need to receive its invaluable spiritual wealth.

Third, much Old Testament narrative preaching is weak at best and abused at its worst. This author recently experienced an example of the former case. The experience involved a worship service where the preacher read Genesis 12:1-4 as his text and

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proceeded to deliver a sermon on the subject of obeying God’s call in faith. The message was very inspiring and instructional in substance. However, it had very little to say about the text—God’s call in Abram’s life—outside of a few introductory comments. The text was nothing more than a “launch pad” scripture from which the “sermon rocket” blasted off never to return. This example illustrates how well-intentioned preachers can give lip service to having preached from the Old Testament narratives when in fact they have neglected them.

An example of improper, even abusive, use of Old Testament narrative can be seen in the work of Origen. This biblical critic, theologian and religious writer who lived c. A.D. 185-254 recognized a triple sense in scripture interpretation—literal, moral, and allegorical—of which he favored the last. With boldness he taught that Pharaoh represented the Devil while the male and female children of the Hebrews represented the rational and animal faculties of mankind. Pharaoh wished to destroy all the males, that is, the seeds of rationality and spiritual science through which the soul tends to and seeks heavenly things. However, he wished to preserve all the females alive, that is, all those animal propensities of man, through which he became carnal and devilish. Thus, wherever men live in luxury, banqueting, pleasures, and sensual gratifications, one can be assured that there the King of Egypt has slain all the males and preserved all the females alive.9

This example of allegorizing a text has seen repeated use down through the

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9 Ibid., 199.
centuries and has been at the heart of much faulty teaching and preaching within the church. While Old Testament narratives appear to be the primary target of the "allegorizing" preachers, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart have observed: "There are allegorical portions of Scripture (e.g. Ezekiel 23 or parts of Revelation) but none of the scriptural allegories is simple narrative." Other abuses and misuses of Old Testament narratives could be cited but these are sufficient to illustrate the problem. The author will address these and other errors by interpreters in the first phase of his project. In addition, the author will offer guidelines for the proper interpretation of narratives in the same section. These guidelines are central to effectiveness in preaching Old Testament narrative scripture.

Fourth, the truths and/or principles taught in Old Testament narratives have relevance for people in this day. Although culture, traditions and societal beliefs have changed and do change constantly, the basic needs of people—emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual—never really change at their essence. Michael Duduit comments on the tremendous relevance that Old Testament narratives have for believers today:

Christians who seek faith to follow God’s will for their lives can draw courage from Abraham, who left the comfortable and familiar to venture out into an unknown future. Those who feel their own resources are inadequate can gain great insight from God’s dealings with Gideon—reducing the army of 32,000 to just 300, then using the handful to vanquish the Midianites. Those who would be tempted to exploit others will be confronted forcefully by the prophetic challenge of Amos. Those who are in the midst of trials can find strength in the story of

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10 Fee and Stuart, 84.
The narratives of the Old Testament not only present truths for contemporary people to believe and live by, they also present them on several levels. Leland Ryken notes this important aspect of Old Testament narratives:

Bible stories often carry a surface meaning that no one can miss, combined with difficult issues that require interpretive skill to notice and unravel. In a sense the Bible is ready to meet its readers, whether children or adults, at whatever level their own background of experience and literary ability allows them to meet it. This is true not only of the content of Bible stories but also their artistry. For people whose literary capacity has been awakened, there is as much excellence of literary technique to relish in the stories of the Bible as in other literature.  

Yet, the “meaning” of the text must be presented by a skilled interpreter to a contemporary audience. Lawrence E. Toombs, in his book *The Old Testament in Christian Preaching*, states very clearly the task of the Bible preacher at this point:

Biblical preaching does not consist in having a text and preaching a sermon, two operations that may be nearly unrelated to one another. It consists in determining the intention of the passage to be preached, and then taking up that intent, looking at it from various points of view and applying it in various ways until it takes on clarity and meaning in the minds of the hearers, . . . . The preacher is perpetually in the position of Second Isaiah, preparing the way of the Lord. His task is to clarify the Scripture so that the living Word of God may do its own work in the hearts of the congregation.  

It is with this conviction that the preacher of Old Testament narrative can say without reservation to his congregation, “I have a message for you today from God’s

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12 Leland Ryken, “And It Came to Pass: The Bible as God’s Storybook”, in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 1990 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1990), 140.

Word.” Modern preachers must learn to bridge the “then” of the Old Testament narrative with the “now” needs of the contemporary audience. The belief that this can and must be done is a primary motivation for this project.

Fifth, the author has long recognized his personal deficiency in the area of Old Testament preaching. A lack of proper training while in seminary coupled with a failure to seek out additional training and/or instructional resources has led to this weakness. The author believes that a lack of proper training is at the heart of the neglect and abuse of the Old Testament in preaching by many modern preachers. D. A. Carson, a teacher of seminary students, laments this problem:

The best of Western seminaries and theological colleges reinforce the cultural bent toward the abstract and fill students’ heads with the importance of grammatical, lexicographical exegesis. Such exegesis is, of course, of enormous importance. But in students who do not have a feel for literature, it can have the unwitting effect of so focusing on the tree... that the entire forest remains unseen, except perhaps as a vague and enormous challenge.14

However, blame cannot and must not be placed solely on the author’s seminary training. He has long sensed the need to acquire additional training in Old Testament interpretation and preaching skills. Thus, this project has become a reality. Perhaps those who may read these pages and who need to make a similar decision will do so.

Sixth, a project of this type will naturally enhance a greater appreciation for God’s Word in this author’s personal life and encourage him to a closer walk with the God who inspired the Old Testament narratives. Although this is the last of the author’s

motivations to be listed, it is by no means the least. Indeed, it is most important to the author.

With these reasons stated as evidence for the need for this particular project, the author now turns to address the purpose of this project or the statement of the problem.

The Statement of the Problem

The statement of the problem, or what is sometimes referred to as the research question, is the author’s initial summary of what the project will seek to do. The title of the project is *A Strategy for Effectiveness in Preaching Old Testament Narrative Scripture*. The proposed “strategy” in this project may be divided into three components:

The First Component

The first component of this project will be to present guidelines for the proper interpretation of Old Testament narratives. Along with basic principles of Bible interpretation there are principles which are unique to narrative interpretation and specifically to Old Testament narrative interpretation. Like all other distinct literary genres of scripture—poetry, prophecy, epistolary, etc.—narrative genre has its own unique features which play heavily in the hermeneutical work of the expositor. The work of the expositor is to recapture the “mode of perception that was second nature to the original audience.”

Thus, the first component of the author’s “strategy” will be hermeneutical in focus.

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The Second Component

The second component will be to present a homiletical strategy for preaching Old Testament narratives. This strategy will involve two subcomponent parts: First, the author will present a method known as “principlization”. “Principlization” is an exegetical process which guides the expositor as he seeks to arrive at the central message of the narrative. More will be said of this process in a later chapter; second, some guidelines will be presented for developing sermons which effectively proclaim the message(s) of Old Testament narratives.

An additional section will be devoted to a special sermon form uniquely designed for preaching narrative characters—the dramatic monologue sermon. This form of sermon has proven very effective in presenting the many characters found in Old Testament narratives.

In order to illustrate the “principlization” method, the narrative sermon guidelines, and the dramatic monologue sermon, the author will examine three contemporary messages preached by expositors who have excelled in the area of Old Testament narrative preaching. Biography and a sample sermon will be given for each of the three expositors.

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16 Kaiser, 152, 198.
The Third Component

The third and final component will be to develop and present a sermonic model(s) which illustrates effectiveness in preaching Old Testament narratives. The model(s) will be prepared utilizing the hermeneutical and homiletical strategies developed in components one and two. The author will prepare a series of messages based on the Old Testament book of Ruth to illustrate the model(s). A copy of these messages will be included in the appendix of this project report.

The Definition of Terms and The Statement of Limitations

The term “narrative” needs to be explained within the context of this project and the aim of the author. This project will focus on preaching narrative portions of scripture, specifically Old Testament narratives, and not “narrative preaching” per se. Fee and Stuart define “narratives” as the term will be used in this project. They write:

Narratives are stories. Although from time to time we use the word “story” to describe them, we prefer the word “narrative” because “story” has come to mean something that is fictional, as in “bedtime story” or “a likely story”. It also tends to mean a “single” story with a single set of characters and a single plot. The Bible, on the other hand, contains what we often hear called “God’s story”—a story that is utterly true, crucially important, and often complex. It is a magnificent story, grander than the greatest epic, richer in plot and more significant in its characters and descriptions than any humanly composed story could ever be. So for those portions of this great divine story that have a story form, the term “narrative” is preferred in technical usage since it is a more objective, less prejudicial term.  

On the other hand, “narrative preaching” refers to a style of sermon presentation in

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17 Fee and Stuart, 73-74.
which a passage of scripture is preached in story form. The passage to be preached in this instance may be narrative, poetic or epistolary in the context of scripture, but its message is presented in story format. For example, the preacher may use Psalm 23, which is a poetic passage, yet present it in a narrative-monologue style speaking from David's perspective as a one-time shepherd. In any case, narrative preaching seeks to present Biblical truth(s) in a story format whether it be from a Biblical-story context or a contemporary-story one. While "narrative preaching" may be mentioned from time to time within this project, or even used as an example of how one may effectively present Biblical narrative (Indeed, one very effective form is "narrative preaching"!), this project is not about "narrative preaching" per se.

A single area of limitation deals with the issue of sermon delivery. While "effectiveness" in preaching any portion of scripture often hinges on the way a sermon is delivered, the scope of this project does not include this important aspect of preaching. Indeed, an entire Doctor of Ministry project could be devoted to the subject of effectiveness in sermon delivery. However, while this project will not deal specifically with sermon delivery, it may touch on this subject at certain points throughout the course of the project. This will be especially obvious as one reads the bibliography section at the conclusion of the project. Some of the entries cited will cover both sermon preparation and delivery.

A Review of Major Literary Sources

The following pages represent a review of the major literary sources used in this
project. Because the project is based primarily on written sources the author felt the necessity to include this section in his introduction. Many other sources have been consulted and these are cited in the bibliography section at the conclusion of this project report.

Books Used as Primary Sources

Any work on the subject of Old Testament narratives should include a study of Robert Alter’s book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* published in 1981. Alter directs his readers to study the words, actions, dialogue, and narration of a passage in order to understand its meaning. These are, in the words of the author, “the kinds of things one might usefully look for in reading a Biblical narrative.”

Sidney Greidanus’ work, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, provided the author with helpful insights into the subjects of “Christocentric Interpretation”, “Guidelines for Preaching Hebrew Narratives”, and “Holistic Interpretation”. In this important work, Greidanus seeks to aid expositors as they focus on helping modern audiences hear the narrative the way the original listeners heard it.

Another excellent source used by the author is *How To Read the Bible For All It’s Worth: A Guide To Understanding The Bible* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. Fee and Stuart’s work is being used in many college and seminary classrooms as a tool for understanding principles of Bible interpretation. The author discovered and utilized a

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18 Alter, 179.
very helpful chapter from this book titled "The Old Testament Narratives—Their Proper Use." Of particular help is the subsection "Examples of Narrative Interpretation" where the writers use both the Joseph and Ruth narratives to illustrate their method of interpretation.

A third and equally important resource is Walter C. Kaiser's book, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*. The main feature of Kaiser's book is the "syntactical-theological" method which is his specific method for moving from the Biblical text to sermon. However, there is an important chapter which is especially pertinent to this project. Kaiser devotes a chapter to a discussion on "The Use of Narrative in Expository Preaching." Within this chapter Kaiser demonstrates how his "syntactical-theological" method is utilized in the interpretation and proclamation of narrative passages of scripture. Kaiser stresses the "principlization" method, a method that will be discussed in greater detail by the author during the second component of this project.

Three homiletic books which treat the subject of Old Testament narrative preaching are Harold T. Bryson’s *Expository Preaching*, John F. MacArthur, Jr.’s *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* and George L. Klein’s *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle*. Bryson’s work contains a chapter titled "Preaching from Old Testament Books" with a brief but helpful section on "The Historical Books." *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* offers an entire chapter by David C. Deuel, a faculty member at MacArthur’s Master’s Seminary, titled "Expository Preaching From Old Testament Narrative." Deuel’s main
thrust is his recommendation to preachers to “preach the story line” when preaching from Old Testament narratives. Preaching the story line is simply a matter of preaching in story form as God gave the narrative. The book by Klein is a compilation of essays written by various authorities from seminaries across the land. Helpful chapters in this work include: “The Church’s Need for Old Testament Preaching”, “Preaching Historical Narrative”, “Preaching in the Present Tense: Coming Alive to the Old Testament”, and “Where Do We Go from Here—Integrating the Old Testament into Your Ministry.” All three books offer hermeneutic as well as homiletic guidelines.

The sermons used in the second component to illustrate excellence in Old Testament narrative preaching were taken from two primary sources: Warren Wiersbe’s Be Available and Haddon Robinson’s Biblical Sermons. The author has also utilized Robinson’s earlier work titled Biblical Preaching.

In the third and final component of the project many books were used including commentaries, expositions, Bible dictionaries and works dealing with the book of Ruth. Each of these will be cited in the bibliography section of this project.

Articles Used as Primary Sources

Several articles by noted scholars have been especially helpful to the author. Steven D. Mathewson’s article “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives” appeared in the October 1997 issue of Bibliotheca Sacra. Mathewson gives equal attention to both hermeneutical and homiletical guidelines in the proclamation
Leland Ryken’s article “And It Came To Pass: The Bible As God’s Storybook”, published in Bibliotheca Sacra, April 1990 is another fine work. This article focuses primarily on Ryken’s methodology for interacting with Bible narratives. While this work consists of only twelve pages, Ryken uses his space wisely and manages to present a piece chocked-full of solid hermeneutical material.

Another helpful resource is Jesse C. Long, Jr.’s “Text Story and Sermon Story in Dialogue: On Preaching Bible Narratives” taken from Preaching. While not very long, only five pages, it is very practical and cites many significant sources in the footnote section.

Again, many other sources have been consulted during the project preparation and these will be cited throughout the written project as well as in the Bibliography section at the conclusion of the written report.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

The written report of A Strategy for Effectiveness in Preaching Old Testament Narrative Scripture will consist of five chapters. Of course, the first chapter is the introduction which deals primarily with the rationale and methodology for this thesis-project.

The second chapter will focus on the author’s hermeneutical strategy for properly interpreting Old Testament narratives. This chapter will present a definition of Old
Testament narrative genre, examine the special features unique to this genre, and end with some guidelines for effectively interpreting narratives. The central aim of the author in this chapter will be to present the best in hermeneutical research on the subject of Old Testament narratives.

Chapter three will center on the author's homiletical strategy. First, the author will present a method of exegesis called "principilization." This method is central to the expositional phase of preaching the narratives of the Old Testament. Second, the form of the expositor's message will be discussed with special attention given to a form called dramatic monologue sermon.

In the fourth chapter a description of the author's process for implementing the project will be provided. He will outline the methodology used for preaching through the Old Testament book of Ruth. Evidence of his hermeneutical and homiletical strategies will be noted in this presentation. A copy of each message will be included in the appendix section of this report.

Chapter five will be the author's conclusion. Within this chapter he will summarize personal discoveries and goals resulting from his experience in conducting the project. His aim will be to make the project an ongoing commitment for his preaching ministry in the future.
CHAPTER 2

A HERMENEUTICAL STRATEGY FOR PREACHING OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

As previously stated the author's "strategy" for effectively preaching Old Testament narrative genre comprises three main components. The first of these is hermeneutical in scope. No preacher is ready to prepare a sermon until he has properly interpreted the passage of Scripture to be used as his text. The proper interpretation of Old Testament narratives is the main thrust of this section of the project.

While the aim of the author at this phase of the project is not to enter into a lengthy explanation of the science of hermeneutics, it will be helpful for introductory purposes to define the science. The word "hermeneutics" comes from a Greek word which means to interpret or to explain. Thus, hermeneutics in this context is the science of interpreting the Bible.19

Very often the term "exegesis" is used interchangeably with the term "hermeneutics." However, there is a subtle difference in these two sciences. Most Biblical scholars have used the term exegesis to describe the concern for what a Biblical

writer meant and how that meaning was perceived by those who first read it.\textsuperscript{20} Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. identifies the slight nuance in these very similar sciences:

\begin{quote}
(W)hile hermeneutics will seek to describe the general and special principles and rules which are useful in approaching the Biblical text, exegesis will seek to identify the single truth—intention of individual phrases, clauses, and sentences as they make up the thought of paragraphs, sections, and, ultimately, entire books. Accordingly, hermeneutics may be regarded as the theory that guides exegesis; exegesis may be understood in this work to be the practice of and the set of procedures for discerning the author’s intended meaning.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

The preacher of Old Testament narratives must have at his disposal the “hermeneutical tools” with which to do the “exegetical mining” of a passage in order to bring forth the “spiritual gold” for those who will hear his message. Therefore, while the scope of this section will be hermeneutical, the goal will be toward a proper exegesis of Biblical passages, namely, Old Testament narratives.

Having briefly presented the purpose of this component, the author will now move to the sub-component parts of the hermeneutic phase. These sub-components are as follows: first, a definition of Old Testament narratives; second, the special features unique to this genre; and, third, some guidelines for the proper interpretation of Old Testament narratives.


\textsuperscript{21} Kaiser, 47.
A Definition of Old Testament Narrative Genre

The beginning point for defining Old Testament narrative genre is with a good working definition of narratives in general. While most dictionaries will use the term “story” to define narrative, a fuller expression of this concept is necessary for the author’s purposes. Gabriel Fackre offers a solid explanation of the term. He writes: “Narrative, in its encompassing sense, is an account of events and participants moving over time and space, a recital with beginning and ending patterned by the narrator’s principle of selection.” The term “narrative” is preferred in technical usage since it is more objective and less prejudicial than the term “story.”

Even with this unique understanding of Biblical narratives, it is important to note that stories from the Bible share some common characteristics with all forms of “story.” Several prominent characteristics need to be noted and should be kept in mind by the expositor.

Leland Ryken has delineated six prominent characteristics unique to all stories. These are: plot conflict, interaction among characters, emphasis on human choice, a unified and coherent pattern of events that ends where it did not begin, a central protagonist, and the incarnation of meaning in concrete settings, characters, and events.

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23 Fee and Stuart, 73-74.

24 Ryken, 131-133.
First, stories are characterized by plot conflict. Plot, according to Aristotle, is the soul of a story. The plot of the story is simply the action or progression of the story as it unfolds in successive phases with a definite beginning—middle—end structure. A story differs in this regard from journalistic reportage, where a summary of the most important information appears first, with other details added on the principle of accumulation. A story is structured in such a way as to take us through the action in the order in which it unfolds.

Since this is true for Bible narratives as well, the preacher of narrative Scripture must keep this aspect in mind as he interprets a story and prepares to preach it. Ryken warns that this means that any successful teaching of a Biblical story requires that the action be presented in the successive phases, observing the ongoing progression and coherence of the action. This progressive unifying element is utterly lost if an expositor simply reaches into a story for details that support a conceptual outline.

Plot conflict is central to the action of the story. Almost every story is built around one or more conflicts such as physical conflicts, character conflicts, or moral/spiritual conflicts. The story of young David’s encounter with and slaying of Goliath (2 Samuel 17) is an example of simple and multiple plot conflict. One may note the conflict between David and Goliath as being character oriented, but with physical and spiritual conflicts happening simultaneously. On a higher level one can see a character conflict


26 Ryken, 136.
emerging between King Saul and David, Saul’s rival and successor. This, of course, is
the central conflict in the mind of the narrator.

Ryken makes an important observation with regard to plot conflict and the Bible as a
whole. He writes:

Above all else, the Bible is a series of events, with many interspersed passages
that interpret the events. From beginning to end, moreover, the Bible is arranged
around a central plot conflict between good and evil in a way that a newspaper, a
history book, a book of sermons, or a systematic theology never is. In terms of its
overall organization, the Bible obeys the dynamics of narrative by its reliance on a
central plot made up of individual episodes.\(^{27}\)

Bible expositors of Old Testament narratives should pay close attention to both plot
and plot conflict(s) in the initial phase of hermeneutical work on a passage. This
attention will yield important clues to help the expositor grasp the meaning of the
Scripture passage. The central plot conflict between good and evil should remain
foremost in the mind of the expositor throughout the exegetical process.

Interaction among characters is a second characteristic of stories. Story plots are
dependent upon characters and characters must interact in order to develop plot. The
Bible is chocked-full of stories with interaction among characters, with the main type of
interaction being dialogue. Robert Alter observes:

Everything in the world of Biblical narrative ultimately gravitates toward
dialogue—perhaps, as I have had occasion to suggest, because to the ancient
Hebrew writers speech seemed the essential human faculty: by exercising the
capacity of speech man demonstrated, however imperfectly, that he was made in
the image of God.\(^{28}\)

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 132.

\(^{28}\) Alter, 182.
Ryken comments on the significant role of Biblical narrative in featuring dialogue:

Dialogue is prominent in the Bible. The Bible is filled with voices speaking and replying. In fact the incidence of direct quotation of speeches in the Bible stood without parallel until the modern novel was born.²⁹

While interaction certainly may involve non-verbal interaction, dialogue is indeed prominent in Biblical narratives. The author will return to the subject of dialogue since it is central to the hermeneutical process of interpreting Old Testament narratives.

A third characteristic of stories is an emphasis on human choice. The element of human choice is at the heart of plot conflict and it fuels interaction among characters.

One of the commonest story telling strategies is to picture characters in situations that test them. These tests might be tests of physical strength or resourcefulness, mental or psychological tests, or moral/spiritual tests. The element of testing in stories is often related to the motif of choice. Identifying the nature of the test or choice is not only useful as an organizing framework; it is usually a key to the story’s meaning.³⁰

In the narrative previously noted, the David-Goliath story, the test or choice for David was not only a test of physical strength, but also one of faith in God. Of course, on a higher level, it is a test which will lead to the defining of a choice that God makes for David over Saul. The test whereby David is proven as a great man of faith and courage also shows his divine calling as a leader of his people.

²⁹ Ryken, 132.

³⁰ Wilhoit and Ryken, 214.
A unified and coherent pattern of events is a fourth quality of stories. Stories are made up of events which present a beginning, a middle, and an ending. It may be said that three questions are asked and answered in these three phases. The beginning focuses on the question: How did the story start? The middle deals with the question: What happens next? And the end pursues the question: How did it turn out?

Commenting on this “beginning—middle—end” sequence as seen in the entire scope of the Bible as a whole, Amos Wilder states that “(G)od is an active and purposeful God and his action with and for men has a beginning, a middle and an end like any good story.” Truly the book of Genesis clearly presents this beginning, while the book of Revelation prophetically presents the ending of God’s story with mankind. The middle is portrayed and predicted by the books which make up the rest of the Biblical canon.

A fifth characteristic of stories is that the story is built around a central hero called the protagonist. The enemies which come against the protagonist are called the antagonists. Most stories relate a viewpoint from the perspective of the central protagonist. The narratives of the Bible feature prominent protagonists like Abraham, Esther, David, Paul and Jesus. Ryken rightly observes:

The characterization of God is the main concern of the Bible, and it is pursued from beginning to end. All other characters and events interact with this great Protagonist. The story of the Bible is the story of God’s acts in history.

Fee and Stuart concur with Ryken. They write:


\[\text{\textsuperscript{32}}\text{Ryken, 133.}\]
God is the hero of the story—if it is in the Bible. Characters, events, developments, plot and story climaxes all occur, but behind these, God is the supreme “protagonist” or leading decisive character in all narratives.\(^{33}\)

This “great” and “supreme” protagonist may be viewed as present and active whether mentioned by name or not. The book of Esther is a narrative which never mentions God by name, yet, His providential hand can be seen behind the scenes as He preserves His chosen people through this Jewish queen.

Finally, stories are characterized, according to Ryken, by the incarnation of meaning in concrete settings, characters, and events. Therefore, a good story does more than share abstract or cold facts, it shows the event(s) in verbal pictures which make the story come alive. The purpose of the storyteller in doing this is to put meaning into a narrative in order to communicate his message. Wilhoit and Ryken elaborate on this quality:

> In stories, this meaning is always tied to the characters in the story. Characters in a story carry a burden of meaning larger than themselves. They become our representatives. What happens to them is in some sense a comment about life in general. We should, moreover, look upon characters in stories as people who undertake an experiment in living. The outcome of their experiment is an implied comment on its adequacy or inadequacy. We should note in this regard that stories might employ a positive truth by negative example. They often show us what to do by portraying a character who failed to do it.\(^{34}\)

It is important to note that Biblical narratives may or may not have certain morals to teach on a personal, life-application level, however, they always point to God’s work in His creation and among His people. The narratives glorify God, help to understand and appreciate Him, and offer illustrations of His providence and protection. At the same

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\(^{33}\) Fee and Stuart, 75-76.

\(^{34}\) Wilhoit and Ryken, 216.
time, they also provide illustrations of many other lessons important for the lives of His saints.\textsuperscript{35}

When approaching Old Testament narratives to begin the hermeneutical/exegetical process, the preacher should first note those literary features which are common to all stories in general, namely plot conflict, character interaction, emphasis on human choice, a unified and coherent pattern of events, a central protagonist, and meaning or purpose presented through characters, settings and events. The next step for the expositor will be to keep before him an awareness of those special features which are unique to Old Testament narrative genre. The following section will set forth these features as discovered and presented by various Biblical scholars in the field.

**Special Features Unique to Biblical Narrative Genre**

Biblical narratives are more than simple stories. This genre is uniquely written with special features all its own. It is vitally important that expositors who endeavor to preach on Old Testament narratives keep before them an awareness of these special features. All of them are crucial to a comprehensive understanding of narratives in general and many of them hold the key to the meaning of individual narratives in particular.

\textsuperscript{35} Fee and Stuart, 74.
Structure

Every narrative has a deliberate arrangement of constituent parts. How those parts fit together and interrelate will expose the building blocks of the narrative, enabling the expositor to discover the unity, themes, and emphases of the passage. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. offers some insightful comments about this feature:

The unique aspect of the narrative portions of Scripture is that the writer usually allows the words and actions of the people in his narrative to convey the main thrust of his message. Thus, instead of addressing us through direct statements, such as are found in doctrinal or teaching portions of Scripture, the writer tends to remain instead somewhat in the background as far as direct teaching or evaluative statements are concerned. Consequently, it becomes critically important to recognize the larger context in which the narrative fits and to ask why the writer used the specific selection of events in the precise sequence in which he placed them. The twin clues to meaning now will be arrangement of episodes and selection of detail from a welter of possible speeches, persons, or episodes. Furthermore, the divine reaction to and estimate of these people and events must often be determined from the way the author allows one person or a group of people to respond at the climax of the selected sequence of events; that is, if he has not interrupted the narration to give his own (in this instance, God’s) estimate of what has taken place.

It will be of immeasurable help to the expositor if he will devote sufficient time and energy to the study of a narrative’s book, section and passage structure early on in his sermon preparation. This initial investigation will greatly aid the preacher as he seeks to


37 Kaiser, 205.
uncover the "story line"\(^{38}\) or general plan of the narrative. Once the narrator’s plan is discovered, the expositor is well on his way to understanding the meaning of an individual narrative.

**Narrator**

The narrator is the one who tells the story. He, speaking in the third person and usually remaining in the background, is very much the prime figure in presenting the narrative. Robert Alter has written very eloquently on the role of the narrator:

> Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the role played by the narrator in the Biblical tales is the way in which omniscience and inobtrusiveness are combined. The sweep of the Biblical narrator’s authoritative knowledge extends from the very beginning of things, which he can report down to the precise language and order of the divine utterances that brought the world into being, to the character’s hidden thoughts and feelings, which he may summarize for us or render in detail as interior speech. He is all-knowing and also perfectly reliable: at times he may choose to make us wonder but he never misleads us.\(^{39}\)

Although the narrator may be thought of as controlling the action of the story, two important factors must be remembered: One, the narrator is telling a story that really took place, thus, he is only retelling the experience and not creating it; two, because the narrative is Biblical, he is ultimately controlled by the God who inspired him to write.

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\(^{39}\) Alter, 183-184.
Kenneth Mathews rightly observes that "the narrator does not stand above God, giving or denying knowledge where he pleases, but rather has an authority derived from God."  

**Scenes**

Narratives, as discussed previously, are characterized by structure. The narrator utilizes scenes to structure his story. An awareness and examination into the scenes of a Biblical narrative are crucial to gaining an understanding of the story. According to Mathews, where elaborate description of settings occur, the expositor must be aware of its special emphasis. Most likely, these details will come into play in the outcome of the plot.  

Ryken provides the expositor with inspiration for and illustration of the importance of scene/setting analysis:

Settings are the forgotten element in many people’s analysis of stories. Yet they will repay all the attention given them. Settings are physical, temporal, and cultural. They serve two main functions in stories. They are always part of the action in a story, providing a fit container for the actions and characters and allowing the story to come alive in the reader’s imagination. Often a setting takes on symbolic importance as well, becoming an important part of the meaning of a story. In the story of Lot, for example, Sodom is a moral monstrosity, and God’s turning the city into a wasteland is itself the meaning of the story—God’s judgment against sin. Analyzing the function of settings in the stories of the Bible will almost always add immensely to one’s understanding.

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40 Mathews, Kenneth, 36.

41 Ibid., 32.

42 Ryken, 135.
In order to better understand scenes and settings in a narrative, the expositor will do well to avail himself of Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias and commentaries which provide insight into this facet of Biblical narrative. Books and articles dealing with manners and customs of Biblical times will also be invaluable to the expositor. Above all he must keep awareness at all times of the central role which scenes play in narratives.

Time and Distance

Mathews sees time and distance as a key feature of Biblical narrative. He refers to this element of the narrative as the “event-line” and compares it to a railroad track. In this analogy the railroad lines’ stops along the route represent the dialogical scenes. In this regard, time and distance within a narrative may be pushed ahead or retarded by the narrator as he wills. According to Mathews, the expositor should give greater attention to dialogue since the narration of the scene supports the dialogue.

Genesis 22 provides a good example of this interplay between narration of scene and narration of dialogue. In this narrative the journey of Abraham to Moriah is three days but is covered in only two verses without detail (22:3-4). The remainder of the chapter concerns only the brief portion of the third day when the sacrifice of Isaac occurred. The silence of the three-day journey serves to heighten the first words of the patriarch which show his commitment to carry out the task (22:5).\(^43\)

\(^43\) Mathews, Kenneth, 32-33.
Point of View

Point of view refers to the perspective of the narrator as he tells his story. His aim or perspective is made known by the way he draws readers into the action of the story and influences them in a pattern of approval or disapproval. As readers interact with characters and events they are called to make decisions as to whether these are good or bad.

Of course, sometimes the narrator will actually state his point of view. The leadership of Joshua is clearly on trial as the Israelites prepare to cross over the Jordan River in the early chapters of the Joshua narrative (Joshua 1-3). Upon crossing it, the writer tells the reader what is becoming obvious—“on that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel . . .” (4:14, NKJV). Yet, these clear statements are rare in Biblical narratives. For most narratives, however, the expositor must study the statements of characters, the selectivity and arrangement of material, and the customs of a story in order to discover the point of view. 44

Characters and Characterization

Biblical narratives are written with a character focus in mind. Truly, without character there can be no story. Literary scholars identify the following character types:

44 Wilhoit and Ryken, 218.
protagonists (central characters), antagonists (forces arrayed against the central characters), and foils (characters who heighten the central character by providing a contrast or occasionally a parallel).\(^{45}\) In 1 Samuel 25, David remained the protagonist, while Nabal functioned as the antagonist who opposed David, and Abigail served as the foil, contrasting David’s thirst for retaliation with her discerning plea to let God execute vengeance. David changed so that by the end of the episode he shared the same conviction as Abigail.\(^{46}\)

Ryken makes an important point expositors should remember as they approach a narrative in sermon preparation:

The key to interacting with the characters in Biblical narrative is to look on them as real-life people and therefore to get to know them as fully as possible. A principle of literary narrative is that characters in a story are in some sense universal. They are representative of humanity generally and carry a burden of meaning larger than themselves. On the basis of what happened to them, Bible readers and preachers can generalize about people in general, including themselves.\(^{47}\)

The characters of the Bible are rarely described physically or psychologically, but rather according to their intellectual or moral features. Characterization more often


\(^{46}\) Ibid., 419.

\(^{47}\) Ryken, 135.
occurs by the actions and dialogue of the participants. For the most part Biblical characters are described only in terms of what is necessary for the plot.\textsuperscript{48}

The central “character” of all Biblical narrative is God. Whether noted by the narrator or not, He is present in every scene. The expositor must always bear this in mind as he deals with any Biblical narrative. His foremost concern must be what God is doing in the narrative under consideration.

Key Wording and Repetition

Biblical narratives are noted for brevity. Mathewson says that Old Testament narratives are marked by a “spare style” and do not paint scenes or describe characters as do writers such as Charles Dickens or John Grisham. Therefore, according to Mathewson, every detail in Biblical narrative merits attention.\textsuperscript{49}

Words, like details, merit the expositor’s attention as he studies Biblical narratives. In his excellent book \textit{The Art of Biblical Narrative}, Robert Alter has written at great length on the feature of “key wording” in narratives. He writes:

The repetition of single words or brief phrases often exhibits a frequency, a saliency, and a thematic significance quite unlike what we may be accustomed to from other traditions. The one most prominent device involving the repetition of single words is the use of the \textit{Leitwort}, the thematic key-word, as a way of enunciating and developing the moral, historical, psychological, or theological meaning of the story. What befalls the protagonist of the Biblical tale is

\textsuperscript{48} Mathews, Kenneth, 33.

emphatically punctuated by significance, and the Leitwort is a principal means of punctuation . . . . Repeated words may be relatively abstract, like “blessing” in Genesis, and so point toward a thematic idea, or they may be entirely concrete, like “stones” in the Jacob story, and so serve to carry forward narrative motifs that do not have one clear thematic significance. They are repeated to emphasize and strengthen the thematic ideas or motifs they carry forward.

Repetition in narrative was once considered by Biblical scholars to be the result of multiple literary sources. In the last quarter-century, scholars are now explaining the use of repetition as a tool of the narrator for achieving structure and unity within the narrative as well as indicating prominence. According to Mathews, the most prominent use of repetition is for emphasis. The expression “there was no king in those days and every man did what was right in his own eyes” (NKJV) occurs in Judges 17:6 and 21:25 to distinguish chapters 17-21 as a unit. The wise expositor will be careful to note these repetitions in the early stages of his exegetical work on a narrative.

Chiasmus

A more complex form of repetition involves the “X” or chiastic pattern. According to David Deuel, this pattern of repetition is “where the middle through the last episodes parallel closely the first through the middle ones, but in reverse order.” The flow of the narrative written in chiastic form resembles an A B B’ A’ formula.

50 Alter, 179-180.


52 Deuel, 277.
Genesis 11:1-9 demonstrates how *chiasmus* both shapes the account and indicates the prominent idea:

A “The whole earth had one language” (v.1)

B “there” (v.2)

C “each other” (v.3)

D “Come let us make bricks” (v.3)

E “Let us build for us” (v.4)

F “a city and a tower” (v.4)

G “the Lord came down” (v.5)

F’ “the city and the tower” (v.5)

E’ “which mankind had built” (v.5)

D’ “come...let us mix up” (v.7)

C’ “each other’s language” (v.7)

B’ “from there” (v.8)

A’ “the language of the whole earth” (v.9)

The center leg is without parallel and therefore is the focal point of the arrangement, emphasizing God’s judgment on the nations and the irony that God “comes down” to witness their feeble efforts to “reach up” to heaven. The technique of key-wording creates a mirrored effect where words in the first half of each leg are repeated in its matching line (for instance “language,” “build”). However, these paralleling words primarily serve to highlight the exception to this pattern which is in D and D’ where “let us make bricks” and “let us confuse” do not parallel. There is subtle play between the two where the Hebrew letters of Ibn (“let us make bricks”) and nbl (“let us confuse”) are inverted. The motif of reversal is indicated by the chiastic arrangement and the inversion of word sounds. The message is clear: what the nations are building up will be torn down by God.53

Dialogue

Dialogue as a feature of stories in general has already been noted in this project under the heading “interaction among characters.” However, as Alter has said: “Everything in the world of Biblical narrative ultimately gravitates toward dialogue.” Alter elaborates on this “gravitation” by saying: “As a rule, when a narrative event in the Bible seems important, the writer will render it mainly through dialogue, so the transitions from narration to dialogue provide in themselves some implicit measure of what is deemed essential, what is conceived ancillary or secondary to the main action.”

As an example of the important role of dialogue in Bible narratives, one may note that the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 contains more speech than narrative. Another example from David’s life is the account of his adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of Uriah. (2 Samuel 11, 12) The experience with Bathsheba is told rather rapidly with narration while the sinful act of murder by David is given more detail and that largely through dialogue. This latter narrative’s use of dialogue may infer that murder was David’s essential crime over the sin of adultery. In the former narrative, chiastic structure and implications were first observed by J. P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 15, 22, 29-38.

54 Alter, 182.

55 Ibid., 182.
the prominence of dialogue certainly points to his faith and courage as a potential leader of his people.

Alter cautions expositors to be attentive to these occurrences of extended dialogue and to be ready to ask some specific questions about the way the dialogue emerges and develops. He offers these questions as suggestions:

Is this the first reported speech for either or both of the two interlocutors? If so, why did the writer choose this particular narrative juncture to make the character reveal himself through speech? How does the kind of speech assigned to the character—its syntax, tone, imagery, brevity or lengthiness—serve to delineate the character and his relation to the other party to the dialogue? In looking for answers to this last question, it will be especially helpful to keep in mind the tendency of the Biblical writers to organize dialogue along contrastive principles—short versus long, simple versus elaborate, balanced versus asymmetrical, perceptive versus obtuse, and so forth.\footnote{Ibid., 182-183.}

It is important for the expositor to remember that the speeches and conversations of narrative characters are highly concentrated and stylized. The narrative writers used an economy of words to convey the essentials of the story in order to fulfill a clear purpose. “While speech dominates,” according to Mathewson, “interpreters should expect it to be compressed.”\footnote{Mathewson, “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives,” 417.}
Various Impulses and Modes

Biblical narratives are told with various impulses and modes utilized by the writer. Ryken has delineated several distinct impulses and/or modes used by the writers of Old Testament narratives. He notes these:

One, the mingling of three key impulses: historical, theological, and the literary (the impulse to embody human experience in an artistic form). Usually one of these will dominate a passage, though not to the exclusion of the others;

Two, the mingling of clarity and mystery as one moves through the story. For the most part the narrators tell a story but do not explain what happened. The result is that it is easy to grasp the basic action in a Biblical story, but difficult to interpret all of its meaning or human dynamics;

Three, the use of one of four modes to tell the story. These are: direct narrative (simply reporting events), dramatic narrative (dramatizing a scene), description (describing the details of a setting or character), and commentary (explanations of the events). Overwhelmingly, Biblical stories emphasize the dramatized scene;

Four, the combining of two types of narrative often thought of as opposites: realism and romance. The stories of the Bible are indeed actual history, but at the same time they contain the extraordinary and miraculous. They are factually realistic and romantically marvelous;

Five, the stories of the Bible call for both a naïve and a sophisticated literary response. They are both adult stories and children’s stories. In a sense, the Bible is ready
to meet its readers, whether children or adults, at whatever level their own background of experience and literary ability allows them to meet it. 58

God as Hero

The key distinctive feature of Old Testament narratives is the fact that in the final analysis God is the hero. He is indeed the central protagonist of the Bible whether mentioned overtly or by implication. Fee and Stuart rightly comment:

All narratives have a plot and characters (whether divine, human, animal, vegetable, or whatever). The Old Testament narratives, however, have plots that are part of a special overall plot, and have a special cast of characters, the most special of whom is God himself. 59

The Joseph narrative, Genesis 37-50, appears on the surface to many readers to be simply a story of the “rags to riches” experience of a Hebrew patriarch. Many sincere and able preachers will point to Joseph's faith in God while speaking on subjects relating to his sexual purity, patience in adversity, and forgiveness of others. However, as important as these subjects are and sermons on them justified, the expositor should always lead his audience to the true hero of this and all Biblical narratives. Deuel wisely advises:

When preaching narrative, one should take the spotlight off the Joseph-like heroes and shine it on the only praise-worthy character in the story—God. Perhaps because of such a focus, those to whom he preaches will make God the focus of

58 Ryken, 137-140.

59 Fee and Stuart, 74.
their life stories. As a by-product, human behavior will probably improve also, and not in just a three-fold way to correspond to a three-point message.\textsuperscript{60}

The preacher of Old Testament narratives must bring to his sermon preparation an understanding of these special features unique to Biblical narrative genre in order to be effective as an expositor. No matter how gifted he may be as a speaker, his message will be shortchanged of its rich potential if he neglects this initial study.

Three Levels of Narratives

Another unique feature of Old Testament narratives is the realization that they are being told on three levels.\textsuperscript{61} According to Fee and Stuart, there is a top, middle and bottom level of meaning within each narrative. The top level is that of the whole universal plan of God worked out through His creation. The middle level of meaning relates to Israel and God's plan for His holy people. The bottom level is simply the circumstances surrounding the immediate narrative and its character(s).

Concerning this multi-level interpretation the authors write:

Note this carefully: every individual Old Testament narrative (bottom level) is at least a part of the greater narrative of Israel's history in the world (the middle level), which in turn is a part of the ultimate narrative of God's creation and His redemption of it (the top level). This ultimate narrative goes beyond the Old Testament through the New Testament. You will not fully do justice to any individual narrative without recognizing its part within the other two.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Deuel, 287.

\textsuperscript{61} Fee and Stuart, 74.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 74-75.
It is significant for Christian expositors to remember that this top or ultimate level of meaning finds its complete fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself stated this principle when he declared to his disciples that “all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning me” (Luke 24:44 NKJV). Thus, a proper interpretation of Old Testament narrative Scripture will naturally be sensitive to Christology.

Narratives Relate Experience

Old Testament narratives are grounded in history, but they convey more than historical facts. They have a story to tell and this story speaks to the personal lives within the audience that receives the story. In this sense, according to Deuel, Biblical narratives are “application-oriented.”\textsuperscript{63} Deuel notes the major distinction between historical writing and Biblical narrative:

Historiography, as traditionally conceived, seeks to reconstruct historical events based on facts. The object is to tell what happened. Biblical narratives aim to impact readers with what happens, that is, they provide a vicarious experience of the truth to be taught, and thus they move persons to identify with and live by that truth.\textsuperscript{64}

In the Jonah narrative, for example, there are many truths which an audience can identify with. Expositors must not be sidetracked by a prolonged study or emphasis on the historicity of a prophet called Jonah. Nor should they be overly concerned about

\textsuperscript{63} Deuel, 280.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 280.
presenting all the "facts" to support the miracle of the whale experience. While these should be addressed at some point, the main truths of obedience versus disobedience, God's love for all people, the problem of anger, what constitutes real repentance, the problem of prejudice, and many more are at stake. These and other issues relate experiences which modern audiences can identify with. In this sense, these stories are really timeless and universal.

When approaching Old Testament narrative genre, the expositor should consider these unique features as an important part of his initial investigation into the text. Ryken offers this helpful analysis on the matter:

The practical application of all this is that the exposition of the stories of the Bible needs to be informed by literary analysis. People need to hear more about plot conflict and characterization and the function of settings in a story than they customarily hear. They need to see stories laid out into their successive episodes or dramatic scenes. They need to see the unity of stories identified in such narrative terms as testing and choice and initiation and quest. They need to see theological statements arise from the analysis of stories instead of being imposed on the. And they need to see theological meanings derived from stories as a whole instead of the usual practice of moralizing about the specific details in a story. 65

The preceding section of this chapter is intended by the author to be an overview of the "literary tools" unique to Biblical narratives and necessary for their proper interpretation. Expositors who want to be effective in preaching Old Testament narratives should be equipped with these "literary tools."

65 Ryken, 136-137.
Interpreting Old Testament Narratives
Avoiding Some Common Errors in Interpretation

The author moves now to a discussion centered on the more practical aspect of hermeneutics. The interpretation of Old Testament narratives must involve a proper understanding of the genre in its literary setting, however, there are basic principles of interpretation which must also be employed. A good beginning point for this section will be to examine some common errors in narrative interpretation.

Fee and Stuart have presented “the six most common errors of interpretation” and state that “while all of these apply to narratives, they are not limited to them.”

1. Allegorizing. Instead of concentrating on the clear meaning, people relegate the text to merely reflecting another meaning beyond the text. There are allegorical portions of Scripture (e.g., Ezekial 23 or parts of Revelation) but none of the scriptural allegories is simple narrative.

2. Decontextualizing. Ignoring the full historical and literary contexts, and often the individual narrative, people concentrate on small units only and thus miss interpretational clues. If you decontextualize enough, you can make almost any part of Scripture say anything you want it to.

3. Selectivity. This is analogous to decontextualizing. It involves picking and choosing specific words and phrases to concentrate on, ignoring the others, and ignoring the overall sweep of the passage being studied. Instead of balancing the parts and the whole, it ignores some of the parts and the whole entirely.

4. False Combination. This approach combines elements from here and there in a passage and makes a point out of their combination, even though the elements themselves are not directly connected in the passage itself. An extreme example of this all too common interpretational error would be the conclusion that one’s real enemies are in the church rather than outside the church because in Psalm 23 David says that he will dwell in God’s house forever, and that God has prepared him a table in the presence of his enemies. (The enemies, must therefore be in God’s house along with David, or else he could not be in their presence.)

5. Redefinition. When the plain meaning of the text leaves people cold, producing no immediate spiritual delight or saying something they do not want to
hear, they are often tempted to redefine it to mean something else. For example, they take Jesus' words, "Woe to you who are rich." and "Woe to you when all people speak well of you." (Luke 6:24,26) and redefine them from their plain meaning to "Woe to you who love money so much you have renounced your faith in God" and "Woe to you who have become atheists in order to have cheap praise from worldly infidels." That is, these sayings are redefined in such a way that they are narrow enough no longer to be a threat to the people doing the redefinition.

6. Extracanonical authority. By using some sort of special external key to the Scriptures, usually a set of doctrines or a book that claims to reveal scriptural truths not otherwise knowable, people suppose that they can unlock the mysteries of the Bible. Cults usually operate on the basis of an extracanonical authority, treating the Bible somewhat like a series of riddles needing a special knowledge to solve. 66

The expositor of Old Testament narratives must avoid these common errors, and the best way to do so is by understanding and employing proven guidelines for proper interpretation. A solid grasp of these guidelines will guard the expositor from the temptation of succumbing to these tendencies. With this in view, the author now turns to a focus on some suggested guidelines for the proper interpretation of narratives.

Suggested Hermeneutical Guidelines

Once an understanding of the common errors in interpretation has been grasped, the expositor must then move to the guidelines needed in order to do the practical work of exposition on a narrative passage. After selecting a text, the expositor must approach the passage with an holistic method of interpretation. In other words, he needs to examine the passage from several interpretive angles. The author will present four areas of

66 Fee and Stuart, 84-85. The author chose to use Fee and Stuart’s material verbatim because of the clarity and simplicity of its presentation as well as the use of helpful examples. Thus, numbers 1-6 were copied as printed in the text.
hermeneutical guidelines to be considered in an holistic approach to narrative interpretation: literary, historical-awareness, theological and Christocentric.

The Literary Hermeneutic

Old Testament narratives have literary features common to all stories in general. However, they also present special features unique to their genre. Both of these aspects have been explored in the preceding sections of this chapter. The expositor who would properly interpret narratives for the purpose of preaching must not only be aware of these features, he must also be able to utilize them in his hermeneutical work.

Mathewson presents seven guidelines to help expositors address the passage under consideration from a literary perspective. first, the expositor must interact with a story’s literary art to determine it’s meaning. According to Mathewson, the literary art of a story deserves an interpreter’s notice because literary artistry is not an end in itself, but a means to understanding the theological point of a narrative. It is necessary then for the expositor to focus on the main literary features found within narratives.

Second, the expositor needs to follow the plot development and shape of a narrative. Generally, expositors should look for the plot to unfold in this pattern:

1. Background (exposition)

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67 Mathewson’s seven guidelines are presented in summary fashion. A full treatment of these guidelines may be found in his excellent article Guidelines For Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives, 412-424.

68 These main features are presented by this author in the first part of this chapter.
2. Crisis (complication)

3. Resolution

4. Conclusion (denouement) such as to inspire or inform.

An example of following the plot shape and development of a narrative can be seen in Mathewson’s treatment of the book of Esther. In the book of Esther chapters 1-2 serve as the background. To understand the story of Esther, a reader must grasp King Xerxes’ anger and compulsive behavior, Esther’s secret nationality, and Mordecai’s uncovering of an assassination plot.

After the background the plot moves into the crisis or complication. In the book of Esther the crisis occurs in chapters 3-4, which record Haman’s plot to destroy the Jews.

Next follows the resolution of the tension. The resolution occurs in 5:1-9:19 as (a) Mordecai received the honor Haman intended for himself, (b) Haman received the hanging he intended for Mordecai, and (c) the Jews triumphed over their enemies.

Finally, the conclusion which inspires and informs is located in Esther 9:20-10:3. Here may be seen the development of consequences for the principal characters of the story.

Third, the expositor should observe the pace at which the story unfolds. Literary scholars differentiate between “narration time” and “narrated time.” The former refers to the time required for telling or reading the narrative while the latter consists of the time within a narrative. Mathewson quotes Shimon Bar-Efrat on the significance of narrated time:

Apart from its role within the narrative itself, such as providing emphases or implying connections between separate incidents, narrated time can fulfill direct functions for the reader, such as creating suspense or determining attitudes . . .
Since the decision as to what to include and what to omit, what to convey rapidly and on what to dwell at length, is closely bound up with the importance of the various subjects, the character of time as it is shaped within the narrative will be of great value in any attempt to analyze and interpret the narrative. 69

Fourth, the expositor must focus on the dialogue embedded in the story. Dialogue is an important factor to consider when interpreting narratives, for Biblical narratives tend to put more emphasis on speeches than on action. Statements made by characters provide insight into their traits as with Uriah who refused King David’s offer to a night at home during a heated battle (2 Sam. 11:11) thus picturing him as a man of honor.

Of greater significance is the fact that dialogue points to meaning. For example, Joseph’s statement in Genesis 50:20 serves to summarize the entire Joseph cycle, as well as the immediate story in Genesis 49:29-50:26.

Fifth, expositors should give attention to the development of characters. As has already been pointed out, literary scholars identify the following character types: protagonists (central characters), antagonists (forces arrayed against the central characters), and foils (characters who heighten the central character by providing a contrast or occasionally a parallel). Expositors must pay attention to the designations or names of these characters as well as to their actions. These two aspects of characters reveal a great deal concerning insight into their nature.

Mathewson suggests, however, a most important facet of exploring the character development of the protagonist. He writes:

Interpreters must go through the story as a traveling companion of the protagonist and view this protagonist as someone who undertakes an experiment in living. If

69 Ibid., 416.
we can see our own experience in the events and characters of the story, the story has captured something universal about life.\textsuperscript{70}

While not every narrative or episode within a narrative has a moral all its own, the development of a character throughout a book (or cycle within a book) will reveal either explicitly or implicitly lessons about life. Most important of all are those lessons regarding the character’s relationship to God, for He is indeed the "lead" character in a Biblical story.

Sixth, expositors need to consider the significance of descriptive details. Biblical narratives are marked by what Mathewson calls a “spare style.” In other words, they are told with a minimum of detail. This leanness of words should be a factor which merits attention in that it highlights certain details within a story, causing them to clue the reader as to something significant which has happened or is about to happen. An example of this is the description of Esau as a “hairy man” (Gen. 27:11). This “clue” helps readers to appreciate the effort to which Jacob went when he disguised himself as his brother Esau.

Seventh, and finally, expositors may notice how the story uses the technique of repetition. While not every instance of repetition is a special key that unlocks secrets within a story, it is very often a means of making a significant rhetorical effect. For instance, David’s response to Absalom’s death with the repetition of “my son” eight times in two verses (2 Sam. 18:33; 19:4) alerts the reader to his intense grief. Sometimes a change of wording when repetition occurs is an important sign. A classic example is

\textsuperscript{70} Mathewson credits Leland Ryken, \textit{How to Read the Bible as Literature}, 43-44 as the source of this insight into character development.
the dialogue between Eve and the serpent in Genesis 3:1-3 in which God’s original command (2:16-17) is distorted by the serpent and expanded by the woman.

The hermeneutical work of an expositor of Old Testament narratives is greatly enriched when informed by literary analysis. While this analysis may never be noted in the pulpit—though sometimes it should if it enhances the understanding of a passage!—the results of such will pay off in rich sermonic dividends. Effectiveness in preaching Old Testament narratives requires at the very least a minimal degree of proficiency in this area. Expositors who want to gain this entry-level proficiency may work through the sources cited by this author.71

*The Historical-Awareness Hermeneutic*

A passage must also be placed hermeneutically in the context of its historical orientation. Greidanus emphasizes the important responsibility of the expositor at this level:

It is imperative, however, that we hear the narrative the way the original listeners heard it. This requirement means that we have to be acquainted with their world—their language, geography, history, politics, commerce, culture, mores, customs—in order to catch the meaning, nuances, and allusions of words and phrases. Although such historical listening is bound to make preachers aware of the historical gap between then and now, it will also make them aware of the concrete relevance of the passage for Israel. The word of God is indeed historically

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71 This author recommends the following sources for a entry-level proficiency: Mathews’ chapter on “Preaching Historical Narrative” in *Reclaiming The Prophetic Mantle*; Mathewson’s article “Guidelines For Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives” in *Biblotheca Sacra* 154 (October – December 1997); and Ryken’s article “‘And It Came to Pass’: The Bible as God’s Storybook” in *Biblotheca Sacra* (April – June 1990).
conditioned—how else could it be relevant?—but it is not historically bound; the ancient narrative can therefore become relevant again in the new historical situation preachers address today.\textsuperscript{72}

According to Toombs, the expositor must consider the "wider sense" of a passage's context by studying the whole cultural, historical, and religious situation existing at the time the passage originated.\textsuperscript{73} Thus, when approaching the Abraham-Isaac account, for example, the expositor must be informed about the nature of patriarchal societies in the ancient Near East, the traits of patriarchal and Canaanite religions, and the historical/geographical reference of the setting.\textsuperscript{74} A specific example of the need for an historical-awareness in exposition can be seen in Ruth's encounter with Boaz one night at the threshing floor (Ruth 3). While some have looked upon the encounter as morally questionable or even particularly abnormal, the charges against the couple are without foundation when viewed against the social and moral conventions of the godly remnant of those days.\textsuperscript{75} Expositors will do well to reconstruct the historical-cultural background


\textsuperscript{73} Toombs, 17.

\textsuperscript{74} Mathews, Kenneth, 43.

\textsuperscript{75} Walter C. Kaiser, Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce and and Manifred T. Branch, \textit{Hard Sayings of the Bible} (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 199-200. The authors explain that most likely Boaz was not alone in guarding the piles of grain at the threshing floor. They further explain that Ruth was using the accepted idiom meaning "marry me" when she requested that Boaz spread the corner of his garment over her. This idiom reflected the custom, still practiced by some Arabs, of a man's throwing a garment over the woman he had decided to take as his wife. These factors alone are ample evidence that the charges against Ruth and Boaz are false and without foundation.
as best they can in order to inform the hermeneutical process leading to an effective sermon.

*The Theological Hermeneutic*

Along with literary and historical analysis expositors must employ theological analysis to Old Testament narrative passages. Kaiser refers to this facet of exegesis as the “missing ingredient in most sermon preparation.” When this theological analysis is properly done it will yield a “successful exegesis.” Kaiser argues for and defines the essence of a “successful exegesis”:

For successful exegesis, there must be some procedure for identifying the center or core message of the passage being examined. Only when the core of that text and the assemblage of books which were available in the canon up to the time of the writing of that text have been identified will the interpreter be enabled to determine God’s normative Word. Again, it must be stressed, however, that in no way may a theological grid be arbitrarily dropped over the text as a substitute for a diligent search for a unifying theological principle through the process of induction. Simply to impose a theological grid on a text must be condemned as the mark of a foolish and lazy exegete.  

Two avenues are offered by Kaiser for identifying the “center or core message” of the passage under consideration. These solutions are: one, to employ the principle of the “analogy of faith” and two, to resort to a unique type of tool which has arisen in this century—word-books. By “analogy of faith” Kaiser means the antecedent Scripture which informs the theology found within a passage. More specifically it refers to (1) an

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76 Kaiser, 133-134.

77 For a fuller treatment of these two solutions see Kaiser, 134-146.
examination of explicit affirmations found in the text being exegeted and (2) comparisons with similar (sometimes rudimentary) affirmations found in passages that have preceded in time the passage under study.\textsuperscript{78} For help in this process Kaiser recommends that expositors have a well-marked textbook of Biblical theology along with the lexicons and grammars to be used.

Theological wordbooks seek to define the leading theological concepts of the Bible by tracing (1) the meaning that these words have in the various contexts where they receive major development, and (2) the history of these same words throughout Biblical literature.\textsuperscript{79} Thus, according to Kaiser, these tools should help the expositor to check that work already done in Biblical theology, including conclusions which have been drawn about the terms in the passage under consideration.

Of course, Christian expositors see the necessity of a Biblical theology which is built on information gleaned from both Old and New Testaments. This Biblical theology itself has a “core message” which must be a central component of the expositor’s theological hermeneutic. In this sense, according to Mathews “(the) whole of Scripture is preached through the windows of each Biblical passage.”\textsuperscript{80} Kaiser understands this “canonical center” or “core message” of the theology of both testaments in this manner:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 136.
\item \textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 140.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Mathews, Kenneth, 45.
\end{itemize}
It is not imposed, but may be inductively derived from a careful reading of the writers of Scripture themselves. It is God’s word of blessing (to use the word especially prominent in the pre-Abrahamic materials) or promise (to use the New Testament word which summarizes the contents of the Old Testament) to be Israel’s God and to do something for Israel and through them something for all the nations on the face of the earth. At first this word comes as a surprise from God. Then, throughout the Bible its substance is repeated in various ways. The formula itself appears time and again; new provisions are added to it and accumulate; history shows how it has been and is being fulfilled. And all of this is focused around that one center!\(^{81}\)

The Christocentric Hermeneutic

An informed theological hermeneutic that is Biblical in scope will naturally have a Christological component. Indeed, for Christian expositors it will naturally be Christocentric. This author has previously noted Fee and Stuart’s “three levels of narratives.” In other words, Old Testament narratives are told as it were on three levels: (1) the bottom level is the individual story and its particulars; (2) the middle level is the narrative’s place within Israel’s history in the world; and (3) the top level the ultimate story of God’s creation and His redemption of it.

Jesus taught that the Scriptures “bear witness to me” (John 5:27-29 NKJV). Fee and Stuart make this important observation on Christ’s words:

He was obviously not speaking about every short individual passage of the Old Testament. Those individual passages, including narratives, that are messianic or otherwise identified in the New Testament as typological of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 10:4) are an important part of the Old Testament, but constitute only a small portion of its total revelation. However, Jesus spoke of the ultimate, top level of the narrative, in which His atonement was the central act, and the subjection of all

\(^{81}\) Kaiser, 139.
creation to Him was the climax of its plot. Thus He taught that the Scriptures in their entirety bear witness to Him and focus toward His loving lordship. 82

The expositor must be able to take his stand squarely in the New Testament faith, so that, although he may preach from the Old Testament, he will never be preaching the Old Testament separate from his own distinctive Christian gospel. In other words, the preacher's stance must always be Christocentric, rooted and grounded in the faith he is called to declare.83

Mathewson likens the hermeneutical work of a preacher to the preparation required of a skilled lawyer who excels in the courtroom.84 Both professions require hours of competent research and preparation. The guidelines suggested above will greatly enhance the work of an expositor who would be skilled in preaching Old Testament narratives. His hermeneutical preparation demands an holistic approach in this vital area of narrative interpretation. Indeed, this author's strategy for effectively preaching Old Testament narratives is built on the foundation of this fundamental approach to interpreting narratives.

82 Fee and Stuart, 75.

83 Toombs, 26-27.

CHAPTER 3

A HOMILETICAL STRATEGY FOR PREACHING OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

The second component in this author's "strategy" for effectively preaching Old Testament narratives is homiletical in scope. Once the expositor has done a thorough job at studying a passage using previously stated hermeneutical guidelines, it is time to begin the process of preparing to deliver the message of the text to a contemporary audience. Preaching involves both hermeneutics and homiletics. Both must be done well in order for the expositor to effectively preach Old Testament narratives.

Homiletics is the art of preparing and preaching sermons. Within this process the expositor must learn to proclaim the message of the Scripture. Literally, homiletics is the art and science of "saying the same" thing that the text of Scripture says (homo, "the same," and lego, "to speak or say"). While the scope of this project is not to give the reader a course in basic homiletics (He assumes that most readers of this material will have already received training in that area.), there are some basic guidelines which are helpful for any expositor who may want to improve his effectiveness in preaching narratives. This is the focus of the author's second component.

Guidelines presented within the author's homiletical strategy will fall in two general categories. First, he will deal with how to arrive at the message for the sermon;

\[85\text{ Kaiser, 193.}\]
and second, he will focus on the form that message should take when preparing to preach. In his Warrack Lectures, James S. Stewart warned his hearers to beware of the person who announces a course on “How to Preach: by One Who Knows.”86 This chapter is written not by “one who knows,” but by one who is striving to learn better how to preach Old Testament narratives. The basic principles presented here are the labors of teachers and preachers who have excelled in this field.

The Message of the Sermon

When an expositor has thoroughly studied an Old Testament narrative passage, he arrives at an understanding of the meaning of the text. Now he must take that understanding and prepare to communicate it to his contemporary audience. Haddon W. Robinson explains the important task at hand:

If we preach effectively, we must know what we are about. Effective sermons major in Biblical ideas brought together into an overarching unity. Having thought God’s thoughts after Him, the expositor communicates and applies those thoughts to his hearers. In dependence upon the Holy Spirit, he aims to confront, convict, convert, and comfort men and women through the preaching of Biblical concepts. He knows people shape their lives and settle their eternal destinies in response to ideas.87

How does the expositor move from understanding the message of the narrative to being ready to preach that message to his congregation? Walter C. Kaiser suggests and argues for a method called “principlization.” Kaiser explains his method as follows:

Principlizing a Biblical passage is... that procedure which seeks to discover the enduring ethical, spiritual, doctrinal, and moral truths or principles which the writer himself set forth by the way in which he selected his details and arranged the contextual setting of his narrative. Principlization seeks to bridge the “then” of the text’s narrative with the “now” needs of our day; yet it refuses to settle for cheap and quick solutions which confuse our own personal point of view (good or bad) with that of the inspired writer.88

Kaiser offers a six-step process to be followed when “principlizing a passage”:

First, determine the subject of the Biblical passage; second, find the emphasis of the text under consideration; third, determine the main points of the message; fourth, consider the subdivisions of the main points; fifth, find the essential substance (theology) of the passage; and sixth, give the message a strong conclusion. The author has chosen Kaiser’s method because in the words of one scholar “it will provide a sound basis for reflections on how one should move from the study of the Biblical text to a contemporary presentation of its meaning.”89 Many accomplished preachers have affirmed the method put forward by Kaiser.90

The Subject of the Text

The method called “principlization” begins by determining the subject of the Biblical passage under consideration. The subject of the passage determines the message to be preached. According to Kaiser, this subject will “reflect the major concern of the

88 Kaiser, 198.


ancient writer” and “is best if that concern can be described in a way that shows how that same concern is shared by most, if not all, of humanity.”

The subject of the passage is arrived at by first asking what the Biblical book as a whole is all about and then by analyzing the progress or development of the individual parts which make up the book. This initial discovery will greatly aid the expositor as he approaches the task of identifying the subject of the specific passage under consideration.

After discovering the theme of the book at hand, it is now time to focus on the specific text to be preached. Kaiser recommends that a narrative passage be perhaps up to no more that twenty or thirty verses in length. Limiting the narrative passage in this manner will aid the expositor in defining his subject.

When seeking to define the subject of the passage, Kaiser warns expositors against the temptation to “impose a mold over the text by forcing that text to answer one of his favorite questions or to deal with one of the contemporary issues that our culture wants to have solved.” Instead, he urges expositors to study (1) the theme sentences, (2) distinctive or unusual features of the passage, (3) pivotal statements that may act as a fulcrum for the passage, and (4) the opening words or headings that set the stage for all that the passage wishes to develop.

91 Kaiser, 152.

92 Ibid., 205. The quotation by Kaiser on page 29, footnote 37 is very informative in regards to this unique aspect of narrative portions of Scripture.

93 Ibid., 153 and 155.
Robinson notes that very often the initial statement of a subject will be too broad. He suggests that in this case the subject be narrowed by asking a series of definitive questions which key on the words who, what, when, where, why and how. Applying these six questions to the proposed subject will help the expositor be more exact.  

Vines recommends that a one-sentence statement summarizing the whole thought of the Scripture passage to be preached should be written at the outset of the expositor’s task. This one-sentence statement will be in the words of Farris D. Whitesell “the whole sermon in a nutshell.”

Using this statement of the text’s subject will aid the expositor in staying on track throughout his sermon preparation.

The Emphasis of the Text

Following the determination of the text’s subject, it is time to find the emphasis of the text under consideration. Kaiser suggests that the original author’s “leading concepts” are sometimes marked by key terms and important words. These leading

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94 Robinson, Biblical Preaching, 67. Robinson offers “a bit of verse” to help remember these questions:

I had six faithful friends,
They taught me all I know,
Their names are How and What and Why,
When and Where and Who.


96 Kaiser, 155.
concepts will guide the expositor in knowing the emphases which make up the fundamental components of the original author's subject. Kaiser offers this advice:

Time and again the exegete may be saved from would-be disaster and the perils of subjectivism by relying on the text's own pattern of emphasis as it is often indicated by some stylistic, grammatical, or rhetorical device that supplies the authoritative basis for principlizing that text. Where such emphases in words, terms, stylistics, rhetorical devices, or even repeated grammatical forms are lacking, the interpreter must rely on other factors to guide him in the principlizing or application stage.97

Referring to the "emphases" of the text as a "complement(s)" that completes the subject, Robinson suggests a series of questions to aid the expositor:

A series of different questions must be raised when trying to understand a story. A sampling of those questions might be: Who are the characters in the story and why did the author include them? Do the characters contrast with one another? How do these characters develop as the story develops? What does the setting contribute to the story? What structure holds the story together and provides its unity? How do the individual episodes fit into the total framework? What conflicts develop and how are they resolved? Why did the writer bother telling the story? What ideas lie behind the story, implied but not stated? Finally, can those ideas be stated through a subject and complement?98

Expositors may seldom have to devote much time to complex grammatical structures within narratives, but instead will need to focus more effort on deriving the original author's meaning from a broad study of the passage.

The Main Points of the Message

The expositor is now ready to formulate the main points of his message. These main points will grow out of the subject identification and the emphasis(es) or

97 Ibid., 156.

98 Robinson, Biblical Preaching, 69.
complement(s) within the passage under consideration. Kaiser recommends an analysis of each paragraph of the narrative in order to arrive at the theme proposition or topic sentence (even if it is only implicit) which plainly declares what that particular paragraph is all about.\textsuperscript{99} He elaborates:

We are saying only that the exegete, teacher, and preacher must locate the important sentences in each targeted text. Usually there will be only one such sentence for each paragraph. It will be the theme proposition or what we have also designated as the topic sentence of the paragraph.

It will be from these sentences that the interpreter will build the main points of the message or lesson. This will be best accomplished by weighing each topic sentence against the author's major concern in the whole text under scrutiny. Armed with this perspective, the interpreter should begin to see a way in which these topic sentences can be formulated into major points which will not only preserve the precise meaning of the original text, but will also provide an invitation, challenge, and instruction to moderns.\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{99} See Kaiser's chapter four “Syntactical Analysis,” \textit{Toward an Exegetical Theology}, 87-104, for greater detail on this process.

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 157. Kaiser provides an excellent example of this process using Nehemiah 6 on pages 207-208. He suggests a message from Nehemiah 6 on the subject of how godly men handle personal attacks while attempting a ministry for God. The sermon is based on four paragraphs of text (6:1-19) which form the basis for the four major points of his message. Within each of these four paragraphs the writer recorded a key statement which suggests one of God's abiding helps for Nehemiah:

I. A God-given Sense of Direction (6:1-4; “I am doing a great work and I cannot come”)

II. A God-given Spirit of Determination (6:5-9; “Nothing you are saying is true... But now, O God, strengthen thou my hands”)

III. A God-given Heart of Discernment (6:10-14; “Then I knew that God had not sent him”)

IV. A God-given Demonstration of Approval (6:15-19; “They perceived this work had been accomplished by the help of our God”)

Because this method is expository in nature, the main points for the message are drawn from the passage used as the sermon text. The object of these divisions (or main points) in the message is to make clear the central idea of the Scripture. Thus, the outline for the sermon is not imposed upon the text but drawn from it. Also, the matter of how many points to use is solved by a faithfulness to the subject and emphases of the text itself.

Kaiser offers practical advice in outlining the major divisions or main points by suggesting that expositors avoid using dated statements, deleting proper names (except for God’s names) and likewise any other wording which would tend to focus the listeners’ attention more on the “thenness” of the text than on the “now” of God’s new challenge.  

The Subpoints of the Message

The subdivisions of the main points are next in order. These deal with the logic and development of the main points. Kaiser explains that “(the) method of extracting the subpoints or subdivisions of the main points ought to be the same in principle as the method used for formulating the main divisions.” He does state this caution however:

It is best to limit the number of subdivisions lest the outline tend to make the text seem more complex than it really is. The object ought to be to simplify the structure so as to provide to every listener an insight into the skeleton and linking sinews of the text.

\[101\] Ibid., 157-158.
\[102\] Ibid., 159.
\[103\] Ibid., 159.
Jones recommends that the number of sub-points be limited as well noting that “over analysis can be hampering to the preacher as well as deadening to the hearer.”

The Theology of the Text

Now the expositor must consider the theology of the passage to be preached. Already, attention has been devoted to the subject of theological analysis in narrative interpretation (See Chapter Two—“The Theological Hermeneutic”). Expositors must consider the theology of antecedent Scripture when dealing with a passage. Also, the use of theological wordbooks will be valuable in combining with a study of antecedent Scripture in revealing the core theology of a passage.

The core theology of a passage will be at the very heart of the expositor’s message. It will direct him as to what should be stressed to his congregation so that the result will be personal response and growth. It is the key to the “now” needs of today. The great theological truths that spoke to the hearts of Old Testament believers can speak to modern day believers as well.

Fee and Stuart suggest “ten principles” which will guide the expositor as he does the practical work of directing the theological interpretation of the narrative toward a teaching or principilizing focus. These are:

1. An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.

2. An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines propositionally taught elsewhere.

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104 Jones, 100. He goes on to tell how John Broadus once received a homiletical exercise divided and subdivided until the divisions totaled more than 120. Broadus stated: “The analysis was almost faultless, but it would have made an intolerable sermon.”
3. Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.

4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it is just the opposite.

5. Most of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect and their actions are, too.

6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge that on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically already in the Scripture.

7. All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given (cf. John 21:25). What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.

8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere, in other ways.

9. Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually stating it).

10. In the final analysis, God is the hero of all Biblical narratives.\(^\text{105}\)

The Conclusion of the Message

Kaiser argues for a strong conclusion to the expositor’s message at this point. After stating his concern over too much time devoted to sermon introductions by many modern preachers, he urges expositors to devote more time to an expanded and clearly thought-out conclusion for their message. He explains how this may be accomplished:

> Here again we believe the Biblical text itself will suggest what our conclusion might be. At least we ought to begin by asking where the author

\(^\text{105}\) Fee and Stuart, 78.
thought that God was leading the original audience who first heard this message. Usually that is all that we need to observe and the pattern for our own conclusion will be set.\footnote{Kaiser, 163.}

The conclusion of the message should crystallize in the minds of the audience what is "principlized" in the message. It should leave them knowing clearly what has been taught to believe and/or do as well as a brief reminder of the rationale for such action. In this sense, the conclusion completes, but at the same time extends (By calling for action!) the principlization process.

**An Example of Principlization**

The preaching and teaching ministry of Warren W. Wiersbe is an excellent example of principlization in action. Wiersbe is known as an author, pastor, and radio Bible teacher. He was for seven years pastor of Chicago’s Moody Memorial Church and later served as General Director and Bible teacher for the Back to the Bible radio program. He has authored over 100 books, including the New Testament and Old Testament “BE” series.

Kaiser’s principlization method can be illustrated by Wiersbe’s message “Faith Is the Victory” based on Judges 7:1-25.\footnote{A complete manuscript of his sermon can be found in Wiersbe’s book, *Be Available* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1994), 58-68.} Of course, this is the familiar story of Gideon’s victory over the Midianites. Within a brief but effective introduction, Wiersbe states the subject of his text—this is a story of faith in action which reveals three important
principles about faith. He stresses that people today can learn from this narrative how to be overcomers by applying these principles to their lives.

Wiersbe presents three main points drawn from the text with supporting subpoints:

I. God tests our faith (Judges 7:1-8)
   A. The first sifting (vv. 1-3)
   B. The second sifting (vv. 4-8)

II. God encourages our faith (Judges 7:9-1Sa)
   A. God gave Gideon another promise (v. 9)
   B. God gave Gideon another sign (vv. 10-14)

III. God honors our faith (Judges 7:15b-25)
   A. God gave him wisdom to prepare the army (vv. 15b-18)
   B. God gave him courage to lead the army (vv. 19-22)
   C. God gave him opportunity to enlarge the army (vv. 23-25)

The main points of this message are clearly the product of solid Biblical interpretation and practical application. They are present tense and personal in wording, bringing the “then” of the text to the “now” situation of today. While the subpoints are not presented in like manner, they clearly serve as support for the expositor as he tells the story of the narrative.

After reading this message it is evident that Wiersbe does an excellent job of balancing his presentation of the original story with his application to a contemporary audience. He makes repeated application of his principles to his audience throughout the message. It is obvious that he not only knows how to exegete the Scripture, but also his potential hearers. He has a solid grasp of his text and his congregation. Beginning expositors would be helped greatly in their study of applying “principlization” by reading Wiersbe’s “Be” series which is his expositional work covering most books of the Bible.
The Form of the Sermon

Effectively preaching Old Testament narratives is a process which begins with an understanding of the uniqueness of Biblical narratives and the methods by which they are properly interpreted (the hermeneutical strategy). Following this the expositor must move from interpretation to application. In other words, he must move from the “then” of the narrative to the “now” situation of his hearers. This “move” or process is one previously referred to as principlizing a Biblical text. Once the work of principlization is complete, the expositor is ready to place the message into a sermon form which will communicate the principles of the narrative in an effective manner to his audience.

Steven Mathewson has suggested five guidelines for preparing the form of the sermon so that it effectively communicates its message to a contemporary audience.\footnote{\textsuperscript{108} Mathewson, “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives,” 424-435.}

Preach Blocks of Narrative Large Enough to Communicate a Big Idea

Kaiser has already suggested that when working with historical narrative it will be easier and more practical to focus on larger portions of Scripture than when dealing with didactic material.\footnote{\textsuperscript{109} Kaiser, 153.} Mathewson recommends that the expositor make sure his selected unit contains a background, crisis, and resolution (and sometimes a separate conclusion).
In most cases the preaching unit will be determined sometime during the exegetical process.

Concerning this matter of determining the "big idea" and consequently the narrative "block" to preach, Olford shares this example with commentary:

A contrasting text would be the account of King Asa found in 2 Chronicles 14:1—16:14. The preacher needs to consider the concerns of the chronicler in presenting the various kings and events throughout this portion of Scripture. Certainly one could preach a number of messages on the account of this king of Judah. But two periods of his life are presented: the period when he sought the Lord and encouraged Judah to do so (14:1—15:19) and the period when he did not seek the Lord (16:1-14). A contrast is clear as you read the prophetic challenge of the seer Hanani and Asa's response (16:7-10). Given the genre of Chronicles and the overall message and impact, the nature of the text lends itself to one or two messages even though the narrative is made up of numerous paragraphs. Certainly more messages could be preached from the three chapters; but the flow of the text, the important contrast within the text, and the doctrinal focus of the text make one or two messages adequate in our opinion. We recommend that the preacher consider the literary genre and the "doctrinal density" of the text as he considers the textual dimensions of the message.  

Develop an Outline that will Highlight the Story Line of the Narrative

Mathewson presents three "options" which fall along the lines of deductive, inductive, and an inductive/deductive combination of sermon forms. Robinson explains that in deductive sermons the "big idea" appears as part of the sermon introduction and the body of the message explains, proves, or applies it. With the inductive sermon, on the other hand, the introduction introduces only the first point, then with a strong transition each new point links to the previous point until the idea emerges in the conclusion. However, an inductive/deductive combination has the expositor developing his

110 Olford, 98.
introduction and first point inductively, leading to the statement of his idea. Then the remainder of the sermon proceeds deductively to explain, prove, or apply the idea.\textsuperscript{111}

OPTION ONE: Develop theological points that are derived from the “crisis” and “resolution” elements of the plot.

Mathewson illustrates this option with a sermon on Exodus 5:1—6:13. In this message the “crisis” is found in Chapter 5 and the “resolution” in 6:1-13. Moses’ plea to Pharaoh for the release of God’s people resulted in harsher work conditions. The raw materials were reduced while the production quota was increased. The Israelites then turned to Moses, and Moses turned on God. The story is resolved by God’s promise in 6:1-13. He shares the following outline:

I. When we follow God, great expectations sometimes turn into great frustrations (5:1-21)
II. Great frustrations can lead to disappointment with God (5:22-23)
III. God meets our disappointment by asking us to cling to His promises (6:1-13)\textsuperscript{112}

The subject of this sermon might be—“Frustrations on the Road of Faith” or “How to deal with the disappointments that come as we seek to be faithful to God.” While Mathewson suggests that the big idea doesn’t come until point three, the subject may be introduced at the beginning of the sermon. In this regard, this message may be either deductive or inductive depending on the approach of the expositor.

\textsuperscript{111} Robinson (\textit{Biblical Preaching}) develops these concepts more fully on pages 125-132.

OPTION TWO: Retell the story in a series of "moves" that lead to the big idea.

This form or model is clearly an inductive approach. In this approach, the expositor presents the story of the text with various "moves" that coincide with the scenes of the narrative. His outline will not provide a series of theological points, but will guide him on the course of presenting the story which leads up to presenting the big idea near the end of the message.

As an example of this option Mathewson offers a sermon outline on 1 Samuel 16:1-13:

MOVE 1—Introduction.
MOVE 2—Samuel came to town (1 Sam. 16:1-5).
MOVE 3—Jesse's sons paraded before Samuel (vv. 6, 8-10).
MOVE 4—God rejected these candidates based on their hearts (v. 7).
MOVE 5—The youngest son was God's choice (vv. 11-13)
MOVE 6—Big Idea: God is impressed by your heart, not by your image.
MOVE 7—Implication 1: Work on your heart, not just your image.
MOVE 8—Implication 2: Do not minimize your potential to impress God.113

Robinson shares a unique insight of the inductive form: "Inductive sermons produce a sense of discovery in listeners, as though they arrive at the idea on their own."114

OPTION THREE: Retell the story in a series of "moves" that lead to the big idea and then return to the story to explore the big idea at length.

This approach is a combination of deductive and inductive forms. The first half of the message proceeds inductively to the big idea while the second half proceeds deductively to develop the idea. A sermon from the book of Esther illustrates this form:

113 Ibid., 428.

114 Robinson, Biblical Preaching, 125.
Introduction

I. Story

MOVE 1 (Scene: Esther 1—2)
MOVE 2 (Scene: Esther 3—4)
MOVE 3 (Scene: Esther 5:9—19)
MOVE 4 (Scene: Esther 9:20—10:3)

II. Big Idea: You can’t see or hear God, but He controls your destiny!
   Is this really true?

   A. He controls your destiny in spite of the spiritual sensitivity of people around you.

   B. He controls your destiny in spite of impossible people in prominent places.

   C. He controls your destiny in spite of circumstances no person can change.

Conclusion

When considering any sermonic form one should ask at least two questions: (1) Does this development communicate what the passage teaches? (2) Will it accomplish my purpose with this audience? If a form communicates the message, by all means use it; if it gets in the way, devise a form more in keeping with the idea and purpose of the Scripture. Above all, pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit throughout the entire process of sermon outline development.


116 Robinson, 127.
Select the Vantage Point from Which to Tell the Story

Expositors may use more than one vantage point from which to present the Old Testament narrative. For most expositors, the third-person perspective is commonly used. However, many effective preachers of Old Testament narratives utilize the first person, monologue approach. An explanation of this method will be presented in the next section of this chapter.

Since narratives usually involve minor as well as major characters, expositors may present messages from both vantage points. They may also preach the story from the antagonist’s perspective as well as the protagonist’s perspective. Regardless of the vantage point chosen for the message, the effective expositor will always remember that God is the hero of all Biblical narratives.

Turn the Biblical Scenes into Pictures that Capture the Listeners’ Imagination

Mathewson notes that “sermons on Biblical narratives succeed or fail with the preacher’s ability to present the scenes of a story in vivid color” and therefore, preachers must “become specialists in imagery.”117 Robinson rightly comments: “Like an artist or novelist a minister must learn to think in pictures.”118 Expositors who excel at preaching


118 Robinson, Biblical Preaching, 186.
narratives have learned how to turn the Biblical text into a verbal motion picture. When these expositors preach on Daniel in the den of lions you can hear the lions roar.

The ability to do the above task requires significant research into the historical-cultural setting of the narrative under consideration. Expositors must utilize Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, archaeological resources, and books on customs of people in Biblical times. Also, a careful exegesis of the text will give direction to the imagination and even set the parameters it must not violate. These factors will greatly enhance the efforts of the expositor as he seeks to capture the imagination of his congregation.

Hone Storytelling Skills

The ability to appreciate a Biblical story is largely influenced by the way that story is told. According to Mathewson, “expositors who wish to proclaim Old Testament narratives effectively must maintain a constant quest to develop their skills for storytelling.” Harold T. Bryson offers some “bedrock rules of storytelling:"

1. **Remember the point!** Some preachers make the point implicit within the story while other preachers make the point and tell stories to substantiate, elaborate, or illustrate the point. The Biblical narration presents not only information about people, places, and events but also theological reasons for existence.

2. **Get your ducks in a row!** Give careful attention to the sequence of events. Putting events in sequence is much more than giving an order of reports. A

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120 Ibid., 434.
narrator needs to build response. Narration introduces tension or response and releases the response at the right moment.

3. *Clip the shaggy dog!* Expositors need to keep a singleness of thought and a continuity of events in narrative. In narrating an event, no side issues should take away from the main events. Interesting narration can be destroyed when tangential matters are introduced.

4. *Focus on words and actions!* Characters in stories have a purpose. In studying people’s words and actions, expositors learn character. So, in narrating an episode with people involved, expositors need to recount actions and speech. Hearers can then learn who the characters are and what they are like.

5. *Draw implications!* Sometimes expositors must trust the story to convey meaning. At other times expositors should interpret the narration. The purpose of the interpretation is not to rob the narration of its force, but to focus on its force. Such explanation need not be an elaborate discussion but a brief application. 121

Vines captures the importance of what is at issue in this matter:

The preacher is chiefly responsible for his congregation’s interest or lack thereof. As you learn to use dramatic techniques in your preaching, you will observe a greater interest on the part of your people.

We have a message that is eminently worthy of being heard and received. We must present that message that it will be interesting and appealing to those who hear us. Some would say our job is not to make the gospel appealing but to make it available. But we are not faced with such an alternative. Rather, we are called to greater effectiveness in delivery so that we can make the gospel appealing as we make it available. Work hard to make the Bible come alive in your stylistic expression. You will discover that your listeners will become much more interested in your sermons. 122

While expositors of Old Testament narratives are not in the business of storytelling, they must utilize storytelling skills in order to effectively preach God’s Word. Expositors can improve their skills in this area by following the basic rules mentioned above,

121 Bryson, 405-407. These points are a summarization using sentences verbatim from his material.

122 Vines, 260.
reading books and articles on this subject, and by studying the technique of those expositors who excel at narrative preaching.

**An Example of Effectiveness in Sermonic Form**

Haddon W. Robinson excels as both an effective expositor and educator in the field of preaching. He is an accomplished author, professor of homiletics and former president of Denver Seminary. Robinson’s sermon “A Case Study in Temptation” based on Genesis 3:1-6 is an excellent example of the process just described.

First of all, Robinson chooses an appropriate block of material to communicate his big idea. His “big idea” is stated within his introduction—“How does the tempter do his work?” While sermons on narratives usually involve larger blocks of text than do sermons on didactic passages, sometimes they may only comprise a few verses of text. Genesis 3:1-6 is a block of material with a clear beginning (The serpent’s approach to Eve, v.1) and a definite ending (She succumbed to temptation, v.6). It is clearly large enough for the sermon’s “big idea.”

Next, the outline of Robinson’s message is definitely the result of solid exposition of the text and it ably highlights the story line of the narrative. He presents his message utilizing a deductive form with two main points and supporting subpoints. The outline is as follows:

I. When Satan tempts us, he comes to us in disguise.
   A. He disguises his person.
   B. He disguises his purpose.

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II. When Satan tempts us, he levels his attack against God.
   A. He causes us to doubt God’s Word.
   B. He causes us to distrust God’s character.

This narrative’s story line is one which shows how the serpent (Satan) approaches Eve and craftily leads her into temptation and sin. Robinson demonstrates through the outline of his sermon how this process was accomplished by the tempter. Notably, the preacher of this message carefully follows his outline, but doesn’t allow it to take a conspicuous role in the sermon’s presentation.

The vantage point chosen by Robinson is that of the third-person perspective. He presents his subject in the introduction (“How does the tempter do his work?”) and then proceeds to “complete” that subject. Like a sociologist or psychologist doing research, he looks on the narrative scene from the vantage point of an objective researcher who desires to develop a “case study” for learning purposes. While this sermon may be preached effectively in a first-person monologue form, this would naturally require the preacher to be female.

Robinson presents the scenes of this narrative in a manner which effectively captures the listener’s attention. Consider, for example, the manner in which he extends a portion of Satan’s dialogue with Eve:

The second part of his strategy is to attack God’s Word. When Eve responds, “We may eat from all the trees in the garden, but we must not eat the fruit from the tree that’s in the middle of the garden. We must not touch it or we will die,” then Satan throws his head back and with irrepressible laughter says, “Surely you don’t believe that, do you? That you will surely die? Oh, come now. A bit of fruit? Surely die? That’s just a bit of exaggeration God’s using to get your attention. He doesn’t mean that. Surely die? You’re too sophisticated to believe that God who gave you this marvelous garden and all these trees, and that bountiful fruit is going
to be that upset about your taking that one piece of fruit. Surely die? You can’t be serious! God doesn’t mean that. God certainly doesn’t mean that.”

In this portion of the message Robinson presents Satan as a contemptuous cynic and effectively utilizes repetition as a means of stressing Satan’s forcefulness in the temptation process. While he extends Satan’s actual dialogue, he remains true to the message of the text and successfully makes it appealing to the audience.

Again, Robinson makes the scenes come alive to the audience by showing how Satan’s strategy is subtly woven into the fabric of modern society. He states:

For thousands of years Satan has repeated that strategy. It is the theme of modern novels. The author manipulates the plot so that his characters live in deep disobedience against God, yet at the end everything has turned out well. It’s the subject of modern movies in which the characters rebel against the moral laws of God but live happily ever after. It’s the word from the sponsor on television. It appears in four-color ads. Here’s a perfume—it’s been on the market for a long time—called “My Sin.” A huckster on Madison Avenue named that fragrance. “Here is a fragrance that is so alluring, so charming, so exciting,” he whispers, “we can call it ‘My Sin.’” You would never guess the fragrance of sin arises as a stench in the nostrils of God.

As this preacher moves from Satan’s dialogue with Eve to his application for the audience (above) one cannot help but say to himself: “Hey, that’s right! I now see how he works on me and how he is at work tempting the world.”

Finally, Robinson demonstrates a competent ability in storytelling. He tells the story of Genesis 3:1-6 throughout the sermon making application of its truths at strategic points. While this message is not a dramatic-monologue type, a type that requires advanced storytelling skills, it does effectively tell the narrative story of Genesis 3.

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\(^{124}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 19-20.
The Dramatic-Monologue Sermon

A unique sermon form especially suited for preaching Old Testament narratives (New Testament narratives also) is the dramatic-monologue sermon. This sermonic form has also been referred to as the first-person narrative sermon. Vines defines this sermonic form as

... a specialized form of a biographical sermon in which the preacher becomes the character he is seeking to present. He acts out the message of the character, often dressing himself in authentic Biblical attire.\(^{126}\)

While sermons preached from a third-person perspective will no doubt continue to be the dominant sermonic form, dramatic-monologue sermons do provide an attractive and effective alternative for contemporary audiences. Robinson comments on their special quality:

The difference between traditional preaching and the first-person narrative resembles the difference between an encyclopedia article about Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic and a motion picture of the event. The impersonal becomes personal and we experience the adventure for ourselves.\(^{127}\)

Because Biblical narratives center around so many interesting characters, expositors would do well to consider utilizing this sermonic form. However, this form of preaching requires special skills and, for most expositors who are not familiar with it, an extra time commitment in preparation. Holbert comments on the challenges of dramatic-monologue preaching:

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\(^{126}\) Vines, 30.

In this kind of narration, the preacher becomes the character and presents the action and dialogue strictly from the perspective of that character. As one can imagine, the dramatic demands increase in the first-person narrative. The presentation must take with great seriousness the expectations that any audience brings to a dramatic event. This is no time for Biblical bathrobe drama! When the preacher assumes a character’s role, the congregation has the right to expect him or her to be that character. Not only must the preacher be viable dramatically, but he or she must also be true to the story in which the character takes part.128

After choosing the character to be used in the sermon, the expositor will prepare an introduction129 which should raise the audience’s interest and orient them to the sermon’s subject. Following the introduction the monologue will consist of a series of moves or scenes from the story that lead to the big idea. In preparing to preach his message, the expositor should prepare a manuscript and then memorize the basic structure, that is, the moves or scenes.130

Dramatic monologue preaching presents many creative possibilities for delivery. Expositors may preach in a costume appropriate to the period the Bible character came from, deliver the sermon in a highly stylized contemporary fashion, do an interview with a Bible character, or use media-enhanced (use of audiovisuals) sermons. Many other methods have been offered by creative expositors.131 Expositors who would more

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129 Mathewson (“Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming Old Testament Narratives”) says that the expositor may choose someone else to relate the introduction he has prepared or he may share the introduction himself. If he chooses to do his own introduction, he may then pause and perhaps bow his head, after which he will assume the role of his character, 431.

130 Ibid., 431-432.

effectively preach Old Testament narrative characters must be open to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in using new avenues of communication.

An Example of Effectiveness in Dramatic Monologue Preaching

Donald Sunukjian has served as a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and is currently the pastor of Westlake Bible Church, Austin, Texas. Sunukjian has been recognized as a model preacher of dramatic-monologue sermons. His sermon titled “A Night in Persia,” based on the book of Esther, is an excellent example of this form of preaching.\(^{132}\)

Sunukjian begins this dramatic-monologue message with an introduction which presents his “big idea:”

There’s a book in the Bible where the name of God is never mentioned—the book of Esther. But even though God’s name is mentioned nowhere in the book, you sense his presence everywhere, controlling what happens.\(^{133}\)

Next in his introduction, Sunukjian shares his intention to tell the story of Esther through the eyes of one of the book’s minor characters—Harbona. Before he begins the monologue he asks this question: “How would this man, who never hears the name of God and yet sees everything that happens, view it?” or “What sense would he make out of it all?” Then Sunukjian proceeds to tell the story from the perspective of this attendant to the king.

\(^{132}\) A complete manuscript of Sunukjian’s sermon is located in Robinson’s *Biblical Sermons*, 69-88.

\(^{133}\) Ibid., 71.
Mathewson watched Sunukjian transition from introduction to monologue by turning his back briefly to the congregation. When he turned around, he assumed the character. Then, at the end of the sermon, he again turned his back briefly. When he turned to face the audience again, he spoke “out of character” and shared a few concluding statements.\textsuperscript{134}

The sermon develops much like a three-act play. In developing the narrative, Sunukjian does not merely retell the story; he relives it. He employs dialogue to carry on an imagined conversation with other characters and acts out both parts. Dialogue adds variety to a monologue. At another place he engages in a soliloquy in which he talks to himself. These devices demand that the preacher experience the story and put movements, gestures, and facial expressions into the presentation that paper and ink can not capture.\textsuperscript{135}

At the conclusion of the sermon, the “big idea” surfaces again but in a subtle manner when Sunukjian’s character exclaims, “Those Jews—they sure are lucky!” Following this closing statement, the expositor made direct application of the big idea to his audience.

In an interview with Haddon Robinson, Sunukjian was asked what was his greatest challenge when presenting this particular message:

An attempt to deal with the entire book of Esther. Not only did I have a massive amount of material to handle in a short period of time, but I had to determine the overall thrust or truth of the book. I determined that the book has to do with God’s

\textsuperscript{134} Mathewson, “From B.C. to 11 a.m.,” \textit{Leadership}, Fall 1997 (Carolsturm, IL: Christianity Today, Inc.), 54.

\textsuperscript{135} Robinson, \textit{Biblical Preaching}, 83.
providential care of his people even when they don’t know what he’s doing. The next challenge was to get that message across in the same way that the book gets the message across. While the book of Esther never mentions God, the story had to be told so that the listeners got the point indirectly. A third challenge was picking the major character, someone who could get the story out so that my listeners could get the point without it being stated.\textsuperscript{136}

Sunukjian went on in the same interview to say that while most of his messages require between twelve and fifteen hours to prepare, this message required between thirty-five and forty hours preparation time.\textsuperscript{137} Both the “challenge” question and the “time requirement” statement underscore what has been previously written concerning the demands of this form of preaching. However, when done well, this sermonic form can be a tremendous asset to the expositor who would seek to effectively preach Old Testament characters.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 87-88.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 85.
CHAPTER 4
IMPLEMENTING A STRATEGY FOR PREACHING OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

The third and final component of the author’s strategy for effectiveness in preaching Old Testament narratives is the subject of this chapter. This component will demonstrate how the author combined proven hermeneutical and homiletical guidelines in order to present a series of messages based on an Old Testament narrative with effectiveness to a contemporary audience.

The scope of this chapter will be to explain the process which the author followed as he carried out his plan for implementing component three of his strategy. Specifically, he will discuss the Old Testament narrative chosen for the project, offer a brief description of the sermons presented, and outline the process followed in the preparation of the sermons. A complete manuscript of each sermon is included in the appendix of this written report.

The Narrative Chosen for the Project

The author chose the Old Testament book of Ruth as the narrative for his project. This narrative was chosen for three reasons: first, it represents a complete and unbroken unit of narration suitable for a series of messages. The four chapters of Ruth present a background, crisis and resolution unit providing the author with ample opportunity to implement the hermeneutical and homiletical components of his work; second, the
narrative being rather short allowed the author to limit the number of messages presented so as to complete the project in a reasonable time frame; and third, while the author understands that this is an academic project, he also realizes that it is a spiritual one as well. Therefore, his decision was also based on prayer and a consideration of the needs of his congregation.

A Brief Description of Each Sermon

“From Your God to My God”

This sermon is based on Ruth 1:1-18 and focuses on how Ruth came to faith in the God of Israel. The message affirms how God often uses people, tragedy and transition times to bring us to faith in Himself. The form of this sermon is an inductive/deductive style. Using this format, the author first told the story of Ruth 1:1-18 and then introduced his “big idea” (It is God who works providentially in our lives to bring us to faith in Him!). The second half of the sermon revisited the story in order to express and illustrate the main points of the message.

“How God Helps Us”

Ruth 1:22-2:23 is the text for the author’s second sermon. The subject of this message deals with how God works providentially to meet our fundamental needs in life. Ruth was helped as a result of a provision in God’s law (Leviticus 19, 23) commanding His people to assist the widows by allowing them to glean after the reapers. She was helped as God gave her health and opportunity to go to work to help herself. And then, she was helped as God extended her special favors through the generosity of Boaz, her
future “kinsman-redeemer.” This sermon followed a simple deductive format in its presentation.

“Before You Say ‘I Do’”

The theme of finding God’s mate for marriage was the subject of Ruth 3:1-18. The inductive/deductive combination was again utilized as the form for this sermon. The author told the story of Ruth 3 in four scenes which led up to his “big idea” (Don’t say “I do” until you know you have God’s mate for your marriage!). In the second half of the sermon, the author retold the story of Ruth 1 and 2 developing his points which complemented the “big idea.” Ruth 1 illustrated the principle of making sure the potential mate is a believer. Ruth 2 stressed the principle that the individual be of strong character. And then, Ruth 3 was re-explored in order to emphasize the importance of seeking out someone who desires commitment (3:9).

“Ruth and Romans 8:28”

The final sermon in the author’s “Ruth” series dealt with the subject of how God ultimately works all things according to His will and purpose. In this sermon based on Ruth 4:1-22, a pure inductive format was used. The majority of the sermon time was utilized retelling the entire story of Ruth while subtly suggesting that there was something or someone at work behind every scene. Near the end of the sermon, the
author revealed his “big idea” (Romans 8:28) and then made three brief points for practical application.\(^{138}\)

The Process Followed by the Author in Preparation for Preaching the Narrative

A General Reading of the Narrative

At first the author read through the narrative several times in order to get a grasp of the flow of the story. This reading process was done utilizing several translations including: New American Standard Version, New International Version, The Amplified Bible and the New King James Version. These versions not only afforded the author with a grasp of the story in general, they also aided him in noting the different nuances in translation from the Hebrew. He was able as a result of this to reference various commentaries on these differences, thereby assisting him in his hermeneutical work. This reading process continued throughout the sermon preparation period, allowing the author to keep the narrative fresh in his mind.

Consulting of Introduction Materials

Next in the process the author consulted various commentaries and Bible dictionaries for introductory materials written on the narrative. These works provided the author with information regarding such subjects as: the author of the narrative, the date of writing, the historical and cultural background of the narrative, theological aspects, and a suggested purpose(s) for the narrative. Also, various themes surfacing in the narrative were noted

\(^{138}\) A complete manuscript for each of the four sermons is located in the Appendix section of this written report.
by the writers of these works. These reference works proved very helpful to the author as he sought to grasp the overall significance of the narrative.

Deciding on a Theme for the Messages

Following a general reading of the narrative and consultation of introductory materials, the author decided on a theme for his messages. While scholarship on the narrative has suggested many different themes coming out of the book of Ruth, the theme of God’s providential work in the lives of His people seems to be prominent. After prayerfully reading through Ruth and then consulting these various scholars, the author decided that the aforementioned theme would be the overall theme for his sermons. The title of the author’s series of messages—Ruth: God at Work!—reflects the theme of God’s providence. While individual messages are presented on various subjects, all are tied to the central theme of the narrative.

Determining the Number of Sermons

The book of Ruth naturally falls within five scenes or moves and all of these are represented by a different location. The scenes are in Moab, the harvest fields of Boaz, the Bethlehem threshing floor, the city gate and the home of Ruth and Naomi. These scenes are also in line with the basic thought units of the narrative.

The author determined to preach four sermons based on these scenes from Ruth, with the final sermon combining scenes four and five of the text. Each scene presented a

crisis/resolution format which gave the author complete units of plot in order to build a sermon around a sub-theme of the main theme. The sermon subjects for each scene were as follows:

I. Scene One: A Family from Bethlehem Moves to Moab (Ruth 1:1-18)  
   Subject: How God works to bring us to faith in Him.

II. Scene Two: Ruth and Naomi Arrive in Bethlehem at Harvest Time (1:19-2:23)  
    Subject: How God provides for the basic needs of His people.

III. Scene Three: Ruth and Boaz Make Plans at the Threshing Floor (3:1-18)  
    Subject: How God prepares us for marriage to the right person.

IV. Scenes Four and Five: The Couple Marries and a Child is Born (4:1-22)  
    Subject: How God works all things together according to His will.

A Hermeneutical Study of Each Text

Following the divisions of the narrative the author set about to study each passage individually. A deficiency in Hebrew language skills caused the author to be dependent on commentaries for this part of textual investigation. Several reliable commentaries were consulted throughout the series preparation including Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, The New American Commentary, Beacon Bible Commentary, Broadman Bible Commentary and The Interpreter's Bible Commentary. Also, an excellent expositional work on Ruth by A. Boyd Luter and Barry C. Davis titled God Behind the Seen was invaluable to the author.
Throughout the hermeneutical process the author sought to be conscious of those features unique to Old Testament narrative genre and to follow the guidelines for interpretation outlined in Chapter Two of this written report. Of course, this phase of an expositor’s work remains primarily behind the scenes in his final sermon presentation. Yet, where these features or guidelines enhanced the sermon’s presentation by pointing them out, the author took advantage of this opportunity.\(^{140}\)

Of special interest to the reader, may be the observation that the author did not allegorize the story of Ruth so that each facet of the book “typified” Christ. While many Christian expositors have sought to “show” how Christ is “seen” throughout the book of Ruth, this author didn’t recognized the liberty to do so. Rather, he demonstrated, particularly in the last sermon, how in the providence of God King David is justified in claiming the throne and how eventually the lineage leads all the way to the king of kings, Jesus Christ. Also, the author ended each sermon with a call for people to experience the saving, providential work of God in their lives through a faith-commitment to Jesus Christ.

Principlizing the Passage

Once the passage or text was hermeneutically studied so as to understand the essence of its meaning, the author entered into the initial homiletical process called principlization. As outlined in Chapter Three of this report, this process begins with a determination of the subject of the text to be preached. Much of this process had already

\(^{140}\) A good example of this usage may be observed in the author’s second sermon—“How God Helps Us” where the narrator of Ruth almost certainly used the word “happened” to get the attention of his audience. (See Appendix B, 13-14)
been accomplished due to the work done by the author in the steps already mentioned. However, arriving at the subject of a narrative passages involves more than an understanding of grammatical structures and word studies. The author sought to examine the arrangement of material within the narrative, the recorded speeches of the characters and the crisis/resolution factor within the text as well as other key indicators that often reveal the narrator’s purpose.

Upon examining the text of Ruth 1:1-18 it is noteworthy that Ruth makes only one speech as an individual during the entire narration. Her speech is a resolution to the crisis of Naomi’s would-be separation from her. Everything within the narration appears to build toward this climactic speech. Ruth’s speech declares a commitment to everything and everyone dear to Naomi. Many conservative scholars affirm that Ruth’s speech amounts to a profession of faith in the God of Israel. The contrasting decision of Orpah, Ruth’s sister, to go “back to her people and to her gods” accentuates the decision of Ruth. Clearly, the entire passage is about Ruth’s coming to faith in the one true God. The author was thereby lead to preach a sermon on the subject of how God brings people to faith in Him.

The second phase of the principilization process involves discovering the fundamental emphases which complement the subject. These emphases, when discovered, will provide the main points of the message. In the case of the next major sermon text, Ruth 1:19-2:23, several factors contributed to the author’s determination of the main emphases within the passage. First, the provision in the law which permitted widows to glean after reapers (Lev. 19,23) was an antecedent theological emphasis which led the author to make the point: “God helps His people through His people” (2:1-2).
Then the entire thrust of the passage focused on how Ruth went to work and worked all through harvest season in order to provide food for herself and Naomi. This obvious fact from Ruth 2 prompted the emphasis on how “God helps those who help themselves” (2:3-17). Finally, the closing scene of Ruth 2 centers on Ruth telling Naomi that she had been helped by Boaz and then Naomi revealing to Ruth that this man was a “redeemer.” While Ruth may have not immediately realized the significance of Naomi’s declaration, the emphasis of the text is still valid: “God helps us beyond what we ever can imagine.” (2:18-23) All three emphases compliment the main subject: “How God Helps Us.”

Through the principlization process the theology of the “kinsman-redeemer” law (Deut. 25) was prominent in the mind of the author. Because it is an emerging theme in the book of Ruth the author only mentioned it in his first sermon, but gradually built upon it until the final sermon where he devoted a significant amount of time to its explanation. In the final sermon, based on Ruth 4, the author discussed how the whole “redeemer” provision worked into God’s plan for Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Obed and eventually King David. While the author’s theme for the series on Ruth centered on God’s providence, the core theology of the “kinsman-redeemer” was prominent.

The conclusion of each message finalized the principlization process as the author sought to crystallize in the minds of his audience what was principlized in the sermon. In each sermon’s conclusion he re-emphazied the “big idea” within the text and stressed personal application in the areas of the main points. Also, the author sought to motivate and encourage his congregation in these areas by reminding them during the conclusion of each sermon of God’s providential work in their lives. In this manner, the conclusion
in each sermon tied together the subject of that particular sermon with the general subject of the entire series.

Preparing the Sermon for Presentation

The final step in the author’s process was to prepare each sermon in a form which would best present the message of the text. The author chose to use a variety of sermonic forms including inductive, deductive, and inductive/deductive combination. The decision for each sermon form was based on which one best suited the message of the particular text as determined by the author during the course of his preparation. While the author normally uses a pure deductive style, only one such form was used in the Ruth series. In his opinion, the inductive/deductive combination seems to be the most effective form when preaching Old Testament narratives. More information will be provided regarding this observation in the next chapter.

\[141\] See Appendix D for inductive form; Appendix B for deductive form; and Appendixes A and C for inductive/deductive combination form.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The scope of this final chapter will be two-fold: first, the author would like to summarize personal discoveries made during the course of his project; and second, to suggest some personal goals for his future preaching in regards to Old Testament narratives. Because the goals grow out of his discoveries these will be woven together within the chapter.

A project of this nature presents the author with numerous challenges in the area of Old Testament narrative preaching. While ideally one would like to address all such challenges; practically, one would do well to give serious attention to only a few of them in order to better guarantee excellence. Because the author focused on three primary facets of Old Testament narrative preaching, his conclusions will be centered around these facets. Thus, the author will address within this chapter three areas of discovery along with those goals he is committed to achieving.

Old Testament Narrative Preaching

Within his introduction the author wrote of his personal weakness in the area of Old Testament preaching. This project has both inspired his heart and trained his mind to be
a more effective preacher of Old Testament narratives. While he cannot claim to be an authority on this subject, he does believe that he is better equipped today than at the beginning of his work on the project.

The author has rediscovered the tremendous wealth of preaching material there is in the narrative portions of the Old Testament. He has determined to have as a goal the pursuit of a balanced treatment of both Old and New Testaments in his future preaching schedule. Because narratives comprise 40% of the Old Testament, the author would like to devote a similar percentage to his preaching ministry.

Two areas of commitment will aid the author in achieving the aforementioned goal. First, a commitment to Old Testament series preaching will foster a greater emphasis on the part of the author to this neglected portion of God's Word. Series preaching is very conducive to Old Testament narratives as Greidanus writes:

Because of the interrelated scenes, Hebrew narratives are ideal material for a series of sermons. A series of sermons on a narrative is able to show development as no single, twenty-minute sermon can. Another advantage of a sermon series is that one need explain the historical-cultural background only once and can then assume it as a given. A further advantage is that continual exposure to the ancient narrative will tend to narrow for the congregation the historical-cultural gap between then and now.142

Second, the author is committed to maintaining an Old Testament sermon series each year throughout his preaching career. Since he preaches three to four times per week on the average, this commitment should be very achievable. Of course, he should always be subject to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in both the planning of his preaching schedule and any interruption of that schedule.

142 Greidanus, 222.
While it is only natural for Christian expositors to gravitate to the New Testament for preaching texts, 77% of the Bible (the Old Testament) must not be neglected. Indeed, the entire Bible is God’s Word and Christ may be seen throughout this wonderful book—Old Testament included (Luke 24:27)! Therefore, this author is committed to preaching Old Testament narratives for the good of Christ’s people and the glory of Christ’s name.

**Hermeneutical Excellence**

Another discovery for this author deals with the vast amount of resources available on the subject of Old Testament narratives. Upon putting together a bibliography for his project the author became acquainted with many of these resources. Indeed, the first component of his project relies heavily on several key resources named in his bibliography. These proved invaluable to his project’s success.

Not only did these resources provide much of the material needed for the author’s project they also revealed to the author the importance of in-depth research whenever preaching on Old Testament narratives. Even those narratives which may appear to be very simple to understand on the surface bring an ancient, historical-cultural background which needs exploration before they are ready to be preached. Lawrence Tombs writes of an all too common “divorce” which takes place in pulpit ministry:

Biblical scholars often look with condescension on the preacher, regarding him as a mere sermonizer, who lacks the specialist’s training necessary to make him a reliable interpreter of Scripture. Too often the preacher surrenders to this judgment, and admitting himself to be unqualified, concludes that he ought to avoid further criticism by not attempting serious Biblical interpretation from the pulpit. There is often a trace of resentment in the preacher’s reaction. The work of the scholars is, he thinks, too erudite to be of much use in the pulpit, and in any event quite irrelevant to the modern scene against which the sermons must be spoken and heard. The scholar goes on his way writing books for his pupils and for other scholars; and the minister marches resolutely on his, satisfied with little
homilies on how to live decently, or with analyses, some acute and some banal, of
the social, political, and psychological scene of the present day, which because
they deal with current topics he has deluded himself into thinking they are
relevant. In this divorce between the study and the pulpit, the ordinary Christian is
the loser. He is being robbed of his right to hear the Word of God faithfully
expounded.\textsuperscript{143}

The author is now aware of a vast array of literary and theological tools that are available
for use when approaching the task of Old Testament narrative interpretation. Whenever
he employs these tools he will have prevented the "divorce" of study and pulpit which
harms a given congregation.

This author is committing himself to a goal of hermeneutical excellence in his future
preaching. In order to achieve this goal and to be more effective in preaching Old
Testament narratives, he is making a specific commitment to begin his hermeneutical
preparation at least three months in advance of the scheduled sermon series. His desire is
to aim for a hermeneutical excellence which will enhance effective narrative preaching so
as to provide God’s people with those Biblical truths needed for excellence in holy living.

\textbf{Variety in Sermon Form}

A final discovery to be highlighted in this chapter deals with the matter of sermon
form. During the course of his research, the author investigated several sermonic forms
especially suited for Old Testament narrative preaching. These were presented and
illustrated in component two of this project (Chapter Three). While implementing his
strategy for effectiveness in preaching Old Testament narratives (Chapter Four), the

\textsuperscript{143} Tombs, 13-14.
author utilized various sermonic forms including inductive, deductive and inductive/deductive combination.

The author normally uses a pure deductive style in his preaching. While it is only natural for an expositor to have a sermonic form which feels comfortable for him in the pulpit, he must not get into a “sermonic rut.” Often times a good sermon message loses its connection with a congregation due to an overly utilized sermonic form. As the author preached through the book of Ruth he only utilized the deductive form once thereby providing him with ample opportunity to test the other forms. He discovered two things in the process: first, the inductive/deductive form provided him with a comfortable form that gave him confidence while presenting the sermon; and second, the simple act of injecting variety in sermon form seemed to foster a better attentiveness on the part of the author’s congregation.

A goal for this author’s future preaching will be to occasionally inject variety into his sermonic forms. He will no doubt continue to use the deductive form with regularity, yet he will seek to utilize other forms so as to increase effectiveness in his preaching. Even with this goal in mind, the author is mindful of an admonition from Greidanus:

As the Old Testament narrator is almost inconspicuous in narrating the events, so contemporary preachers should not get in the way of the narrative but allow it to carry its own message. In preparing the sermon, one would do well to remember that people are edified neither by an oratorical performance nor by information about certain Bible characters; rather, people are built up as they hear God’s Word about the Covenant God who makes history with people, now as well as then.144

Leland Ryken was right when he said that one of the most universal human impulses can be summed up in the familiar four-word plea, “Tell me a story.” The over-arching

144 Greidanus, 227.
goal of the author is to so effectively preach the Old Testament narratives in order that God’s people today may effectively hear and apply the truths found within these narratives toward faithful Christian living. As this goal is achieved, not only will this project be a success, the God who inspired it will be honored.
APPENDIX A

SERMON 1

TITLE: From Your God to My God

TEXT: Ruth 1:1-18

SERIES: Ruth: God at Work!

Introduction

The book of Ruth is a little book with a big message. In fact, this book has many wonderful messages. For example, it provides a powerful illustration of true devotion within friendship. Ruth was not only a loyal daughter-in-law to Naomi, she was a lifelong friend as well.

This book teaches us something of a godly romance between a believing man and woman, Ruth and Boaz, and the making of a happy home. We shall say more about this in a future message.

Ruth shows us how King David was truly of royal lineage and deserved the right to sit upon the throne. The book closes with the so-called “missing genealogy” which connects David with the tribe of Judah. Many scholars feel that Ruth was written during the early reign of King David expressly for this purpose.

Still another great theme within this book is the fact of Ruth’s “redemption” and inclusion within the people of God. Indeed, she is numbered not only among the ancestors of King David but within the lineage of our Lord Jesus as well. In this sense,
there is a “universalism” to God’s plan of salvation—Jew and Gentile may come to faith through Christ (Genesis 12:3; Romans 1:16).

Yet, there is one big message which stands above all of these mentioned. It is the message of God’s providence at work among His people. Someone has well said that the real hero of every Bible story is God. Sometimes we see this in an explicit way and at other times, as with Ruth, in an implicit way. Whether on the “stage” of the story or behind the “curtain”, He is there and at work.

What do we mean by “the providence of God”? The providence of God means that God is watching over His people, and that He brings to pass what is good. Yes, He rules over all and brings blessing to those who trust Him. Truly, He “works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11) and “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

As we begin this study in Ruth and “The Providence of God,” let’s hear the story of Ruth’s conversion to faith in Naomi’s God. She goes “from your God to my God.”

I. The story of Ruth’s conversion (Ruth 1:1-18)

This wonderful conversion story begins in the town of Bethlehem 50 miles northwest of Moab and 5 miles south of Jerusalem. The time is “the days when the judges ruled” in Israel. This is that period of time between the death of Joshua and the coronation of King Saul. The last verse of Judges 21 describes the attitude and activities of Israel’s population in that day—“...everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Consequently, they did not do what was right in God’s eyes and therefore suffered the consequences.
While this was the situation in most of the land, the people in the little town of Bethlehem appear to be religiously of a better sort. Ruth’s story begins in a “certain” home there in Bethlehem.

A. Scene One—A Bethlehemite Family moves to Moab (1-2)

The Bible says that “there was a famine in the land.” With this famine came hunger. It is sort of ironic to note that the word “Bethlehem” means granary or house of bread and there is little or no bread to eat.

A certain family headed by a man named Elimelech took his family of four down to the country of Moab. Now Moab was a pagan nation on the east side of the Dead Sea and the Israelites had a bitter hatred for the Moabites which went back all the way to the time when these people refused to aid God’s people as they fled Egypt. Yet, I’m sure Elimelech thought as many people do today—“Desperate times demand desperate measures!” So this man, his wife Naomi; and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion head for Moab. The Bible says that they “remained” there, but the verb used in the Hebrew suggests that they planned to return home in the due course of time.

We are not told as to presence or absence of God’s will in this decision. We can only speculate based on the actions of others who have done likewise. Generally, whenever God’s people move toward pagans and settle down with them trouble is on the horizon. Yet, God can take even our poor decisions and use them for His glory.

B. Scene Two—Three men die (3-5)

The next scene is a very sad one in the life of this family. The details are sketchy, but we can grasp the essence of this great tragedy.
We are told that after moving to Moab, Elimelech died and left Naomi a widow. Her two sons married Moabite girls, one of which is Ruth, and then both sons die. What a terrible grief this must have been for their wives, and especially Naomi. Interestingly, the names Mahlon and Chilion mean “sickly” and “ailing”. Often the circumstances of one’s birth in ancient times played into the naming of a child. Ten years in Moab brought three tragic deaths.

Did Elimelech die because of his decision to move to Moab? We are not told. Did his sons die because they married girls who were unbelievers? They disobeyed God at this point (Deut. 7:3-4) and so do we when Christians marry unbelievers (II Cor. 6:14). However, as with Elimelech’s death we do not know the reason. Whatever the reason, they died and three widows were left.

This Jewish family is far from God’s promised land and possibly out of God’s will, yet God is near them and at work behind the scenes of their tragedy.

C. Scene Three—Naomi decides to move back to Bethlehem (6-18)

The third and final scene in Ruth’s conversion story takes place following the death of Mahlon, Ruth’s husband and after Naomi hears the news that the famine in Israel is over.

Naomi decides to move back to Bethlehem, a decision which is only natural since she would more likely be helped among her own people than among foreign people. As she begins her journey home her daughters-in-law decide to go with her, but Naomi tries to dissuade them from going. First, she encourages them to stay and marry men from their homeland. She even prays and pronounces a blessing upon them. When they refuse to stay, she tries a more reasoned approach, telling them that she cannot provide them
sons to marry. All through the dialogue the scene is one of great emotion as the women insist upon going with Naomi.

Finally, Orpah decides to heed the wisdom of her mother-in-law and after kissing Naomi goodbye she goes back to her homeland. At this Naomi uses Orpah’s decision to try and dissuade Ruth “but Ruth clung to her.” When Naomi insists that Ruth follow the example of her sister, we hear Ruth’s profession of devotion to Naomi and faith in God. (Read verses 16-17)

And Ruth said, Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people and thy God, my God; Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.

Almost all conservative scholars agree that this declaration constitutes a conversion on the part of Ruth. The remainder of the book surely substantiates the veracity of her faith. How did Ruth arrive at this decision coming from a totally pagan background?

II. THE BIG IDEA IN THIS STORY: It is God who works providentially in our lives to bring us to faith in Him!

How did Ruth move from paganism to faith in Naomi’s God? Or better, how do any of us arrive at a point of decision to place our faith in God? Two Scriptures come to mind as I consider the answer to these questions.

—Romans 10:17 So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

—Ephesians 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.
Both of these Scriptures teach us that faith is first of all a product of God’s initiative in our lives. In other works, it is God who works providentially in our lives to bring us to faith in Him. The way He did this in Ruth’s life demonstrates how He often does so in lives today.

A. In His providence God uses people to bring us to faith in Him.

Ruth would not have heard about Yahweh if the family of Elimelech had not touched her life. As imperfect as this Bethlehem family may have been, their faith still gave Ruth a personal, up-close testimony of God. Sometimes God uses very imperfect people to do His perfect will and work.

Recently I and several of our church members heard the conversion testimony of evangelist Bill Fay. Fay did not come to faith in Christ until age 40. By his own admission, he was antagonistic to Christianity prior to his conversion. He stated that he would often insult, persecute and antagonize those Christians who witnessed to him. However, he said that not a single believer who shared Christ with him had failed, for as he said: “I never forgot any of the words, the faces, or the persons who came into my life in obedience to Jesus Christ.”

Who has God sent your way to point you to Christ for salvation? To whom is God sending us, my fellow believers, that we may help them place their faith in Christ? Yes, God uses people to bring others to faith in Him.

B. In His providence, God often uses tragedy to bring us to faith in Him.

The great crisis times of life sometimes come because we have been disobedient to God’s law. At other time these are the result of living in a world suffering from the curse of sin. Still, at other times, these events happen because of our decision to be faithful to
God regardless of the cost. However they come, the words of Jesus are true—"In the world you will have tribulation."

Ruth suffered through the grief of her husband’s death. Did he demonstrate a growing and glowing faith in his God in those last days? Did he plead with his wife to trust in God? We are not told this by the author of the book. Could it be that Ruth simply began to think about her life and what she was going to do as a result of her loss? This too we do not know.

Yet, I cannot help but think that a “faith-seed” which was planted when she first met this family, was now being nurtured even in the midst of the soil of sorrow.

Matthew Henry makes an interesting comment on the occasion of the death of John the Baptist and the subsequent trip of his disciples to inform Jesus (Matthew 14). He writes:

> When anything ails us at any time, it is our duty and privilege to make Christ acquainted with it . . . . It is better to be drawn to Christ by want and loss, than not to come to him at all.

Are you experiencing some great crisis at this hour? Maybe you have been struggling with one or the results of one for some time. Could it be that God is using this terrible situation to get your heart’s ear and move you to trust Him with your life?

C. In His providence God sometimes uses transition times to bring us to faith in Him.

Ruth was faced with a challenge in her devotion to Naomi. When Naomi decided to go back to Bethlehem, Ruth made a decision to follow her. Ruth was now about to leave her homeland and family ties as well as to venture to a strange land on the other side of
the Dead Sea. She was a widow devoted to a widow and both were almost helpless on their own. What a challenge!

Some of us today are facing transition times in our lives. Maybe it is the loss of a job and the search for a new and needed one. Possibly it is the start of family life and the responsibilities of parenthood. Could it be that now you have an invalid parent to care for or a physical condition of your own to struggle with? Maybe as a young adult you are trying to live right but are surrounded by temptation on every side. No one but God knows all the challenges faced by this congregation.

I may not know or understand the challenges before you, but I do know that God does and better yet, He cares. And yes, He may have permitted this challenging situation in order to bring you to discover His grace for your every need. Will you bring your commitment to Him this day?

Conclusion: God is at work for you and me. He desires to work His perfect will in our lives for His glory and our good. This is the providence of God. It all begins with a faith-commitment to Jesus Christ for salvation. When we enter into His special providence we may claim Philippians 1:6—“being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ”.
APPENDIX B

SERMON 2

Title: How God Helps Us

Text: Ruth 1:22—2:23

Series: Ruth: God at Work!

Introduction: “God at work!” is the theme for our study based in the book of Ruth. The big message of this little book is God’s providence at work in the lives of God’s people. In the first message we saw how God was at work bringing Ruth to faith in Him.

Ruth first heard of the God of Israel when a family from Bethlehem moved to her country Moab. She met and married Mahlon, one of the two sons of a widow named Naomi. Not long after the marriage of Naomi’s other son both sons died leaving three widows in the home. Following these deaths Naomi decided to move back to Bethlehem. While one daughter-in-law decided to stay in Moab, Ruth was determined to go with Naomi back to Bethlehem. She not only determined to go with Naomi, she also decided to believe in Naomi’s God. Thus, God used people (Naomi’s family), tragedy (her husband’s death) and a great transition time (the decision of Naomi to go back to Bethlehem) to bring her to faith in Him.

Today we come to the second act in this wonderful short story. The last verse in chapter one sets the scene and the first verse of chapter two introduces the lead character. The scene is the arrival of two widow women in Bethlehem at the beginning of the
harvest season. Here are two people who are in a position of great need, for they have neither husbands nor sons to provide for them. However, they are about to encounter Boaz, the lead character in this crucial part of the narrative and God's kinsman-redeemer for these women. The encounter between Ruth and Boaz illustrates for us how God provides for His people in time of great need.

Are you facing a time of great need in your life? Maybe that need is for money to pay the bills. Some people may need wisdom to know what to do at this point in their life. Possibly you need courage or boldness to step out in a new venture. Or, do you need strength to go another week or even another day?

The Apostle Paul declared under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19) We can therefore expect God to help us in our times of need. Ruth 2 illustrates for us some of the ways in which God helps His people in times of great need.

I. God helps His people through His people (2:1-2)

In these verses we find Ruth initiating an activity which was common in that day but not in our own. At least not in the manner in which it was practiced then. She asks Naomi for permission to go to the fields where harvesting is taking place in order to glean heads of grain.

In those days God's law given by Moses stated: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 23:22) Ruth certainly met the requirements for this privilege since she was both poor (being a widow) and a stranger
(being from Moab). Thus, God had provided for her and others in similar situations by the obedience of His people to this law. Boaz and others in Bethlehem obeyed God and therefore helped people in need.

While Christians today are not obligated to keep the Mosaic law code, for Jesus has fulfilled those laws for us, we are compelled by a greater law to help meet the needs of people. I speak of the law of love—God’s love. When asked what commandment was the greatest in the law Jesus responded:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the Prophets. (Matthew 22:37-40)

Jesus tied love for God and love for people together. In other words, a genuine love for God will manifest a genuine love for people. He even defined this kind of love by saying it will be as the love we have for ourselves. One of the ways in which we love ourselves is by supplying our most basic needs. We are to love people in practical ways by seeking to supply legitimate needs on a personal level. The Apostle John asks a very telling question: “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts us his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17)

I read somewhere about an episode in the life of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. Booth was nearing the end of his life and had become quite ill. A conference of Salvation Army workers was about to convene. Knowing that Booth was too sick to attend the meeting, a leader of the organization asked him to send a message to the meeting to be read before the delegates. Booth did send a message for the meeting. It was one word: “Others!”
The one who gave His only Son to die on Calvary for the sins of the world, commands those of us who have experienced His grace to help meet the needs of others.

II. God helps those who help themselves (2:3-17)

I guess we have said it ourselves or heard it said by someone else: God helps those who help themselves! While I cannot find this principle explicitly stated in Scripture, it can certainly be illustrated by many examples from Scripture.

In our text for today Ruth goes to work in order to provide food for herself and Naomi. Let’s see what happened. (read vv. 3-17)

Within this episode we can see the theme verse for this book and our study. In verse twelve, Boaz says to Ruth: “The Lord repay your work, and a full reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.” Indeed, Ruth was abiding beneath the “wings” of God’s providential care. God was using people like Boaz to supply her needs. He was also using the work of her own hands to supply her needs. God gave her health of body with which to work. He gave her a bountiful harvest and a place to work also. She was the beneficiary of His general providence—God’s goodness given to all people—and now His special providence—God’s special blessing upon His own people. Ruth took advantage of these opportunities and went to work. She is a model for a righteous work-ethic in that she took the initiative to work, she was persistent and hardworking, and she expressed gratitude for the opportunity to work. Believers today should follow her example and thereby extend their gospel witness by deeds into the workplace. Jesus declared: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)
God honored Ruth’s efforts by granting her through Boaz’s help more work and a longer work period. The Bible says in Proverbs 14:23: “In all labor there is profit…”

As I have thought about Ruth’s example of helping herself and thereby receiving God’s help, I have been thinking about the “Y2K” issue which is on all our minds. The “Y2K” concern is that computers may malfunction or even shutdown at midnight, December 31, 1999 because of their inability to read the two digit date 00. Of course, the newer computers and all compliant ones will understand it as 2000. Those computers which are not compliant may read the year as 1900 or not know how to read it. While almost all banks, power companies, airports, etc. in America say that their computers are ready, we do not know for sure. Of greater concern is the status of computers in foreign countries where we look for our supply of certain fuels, medicines and food. No one knows for sure what will happen on December 31st and January 1st. That is, no one but God!

What are we to do? Some say we should gather all our money, all the food we can, and “head for the hills” as it were. Others say “Don’t go and stock pile, everything will be like always. There is no need to do anything in preparation.” My friend, the prudent person will make some preparation for a potential crisis. Yes, he or she will not panic, but will make preparation for their families and others who may be in need during this time. However, after we have done our part, let us trust God to supply all our needs regardless of what happens.

III.  God helps us beyond what we ever can imagine (2:18-23)

Before we look at one last principle I want you to note something back in verse
three. It says: “And she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.” This verse is one of the most significant verses in the entire book. This verse could literally be translated: “And her chance chanced upon the allotted portion of the field of Boaz.” Today we would say: “By a stroke of luck!” This expression appears to be a device of the narrator to get his readers to sit up, take notice and ask: Why is all this happening? In reality he is screaming: “See the hand of God at work here!”

Ruth may have at first seen all this as chance or luck, but soon she too will see God’s hand at work. When she arrived home that evening and told the news of work and food provided by a man named Boaz, Naomi shouted for joy. As Naomi praised God for what had happened that day she revealed a wonderful truth that I will explore in greater detail next week. She shared with Ruth that Boaz was a close relative in her husband’s family and therefore may be one who could “redeem” Ruth and preserve the family lineage. Naomi sees God at work in this simple day’s work and soon Ruth will experience the providence of God in an even greater way than she could ever have imagined.

The Bible declares: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things God has prepared for those who love Him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9) Yes, God’s help is always greater and more wonderful than we see on the surface. His will always proves as Paul said in Romans 12:2 to be “good and acceptable and perfect.” While it may not appear to be so at first, or on the surface, it proves to be in the end.

The ministry of Billy Graham has touched and blessed many of us down through the years. His name is a household name in America and in many other nations around
the world. However, this hasn’t always been the case. In 1949 he was relatively unknown in our country. Graham was invited that year to preach in a tent crusade in Los Angeles. The crusade lasted eight weeks and many hundreds of people were saved. While the news of the crusade spread throughout California, it was still pretty much a “local” event. Then one night a woman who worked as a maid by day attended the crusade. The next day she told her boss of the wonderful service and how it had blessed her life. That boss “happened” to be William Randolph Hearst, the nationally known newspaper publisher. Hearst was impressed by the report and soon after hearing it he sent a two-word message by telegram to all of his editors. The telegram said: “Puff Graham”. This order put Billy Graham on the front pages of newspapers all across our land and God used it to send him on his way to national and international prominence. However, for Graham, the crusade was simply a matter of doing what God had called him to do and trusting the Lord to bless the work. God in His providence did much more than Graham ever dreamed or imagined.

Conclusion: What is the great need in your life today? For some hearing this message it is the need to be saved. Before you need bread to eat, you need the one who is the “Bread of Life”—Jesus Christ. Before you need clothing to wear, you need to be clothed in the righteousness He provides which will make you right with God. Yes, as Philippians 4:19 says, God will supply all your needs, but you must first surrender your life to His Son Jesus who is the answer to all our needs both in this life and in the life to come. In a moment we will sing a hymn of decision and I will be available to help you with this decision.
Some of you are saying, “Pastor, I am a Christian, so how do I deal with other needs in my life today?” Why not follow the steps outlined in this message. First, find someone else who has a need and seek to meet their deficiency. Second, get busy about the work of doing what you know God would have you to do right now. Third, trust and expect God not only to meet the need in your life, but also in His providential grace to do so in a manner greater than you can ever imagine. My friend, God is at work!
Title: Before You Say “I Do”

Text: Ruth 3

Series: Ruth—God at Work!

Introduction: Strange things often take place at wedding ceremonies. I once heard about a couple exchanging their vows in a wedding ceremony. The pastor looked at the groom and said: “Do you take her for better or worse; for richer or for poorer; in sickness or in health . . .” Suddenly the bride interrupted and said: “Stop with all that preacher. You’re about to talk him out of it!”

We have come to the chapter in Ruth’s story where our hero and heroine are about to say “I do.” It is a strange but romantic chapter in their story. I want to tell you the story of what happens just before they say “I do” and then I want to share some lessons on the subject “Before You Say ‘I Do’.”

I. The Story of Ruth and Boaz Planning to Get Married

A. Scene One: Naomi Shares Her Plan for Ruth (1:1-5)

Near the end of harvest season, Naomi called for Ruth and then proceeded to tell her that she had a plan for her “security.” That plan was for her to seek marriage with Boaz. Naomi instructed her to bathe, dress attractively, and go to the Bethlehem threshing floor where she would find Boaz who was sure to be
working during that evening. She was to locate the spot where he would place his grain, for he would surely sleep there in order to guard his harvest. After he went to sleep, she would then go to him and uncover his feet and wait on him to tell her what to do.

Before we go any further in the story, allow me to comment on two things. In case some people might look on this scenario with suspicion of impropriety, let me first say that threshing floors were open-aired, public places where many people would be staying through the night guarding grain. Therefore, this encounter was not some out-of-the-way, back alley rendezvous.

Secondly, the uncovering of Boaz’s feet did not amount to an attempt to “sleep together.” This is possibly a symbolic gesture known in that day as a way of asking the individual to claim the woman as his wife by uncovering and then covering the woman with his mantle. At the very least, it was a means of awakening Boaz as his feet would become cold.

B. Scene Two: Ruth Implements Naomi’s Plan at the Threshing Floor (3:6-13)

In scene two we find Ruth following Naomi’s instructions to the letter as she puts the plan into motion. The uncovering of Boaz’s feet not only awakens him, but startles him as well. In the darkness of the night he inquires as to her identity.

Ruth not only answers with her identification, but also with her request. She asks him to “take her under his wing,” symbolizing security and commitment. She specifically petitions him to become her kinsman-redeemer. This is the meaning of
the NKJV wording—"a close relative." The NIV translates it correctly as "kinsman-redeemer."

Allow me to speak for a moment about the significance of the "kinsman-redeemer." The Mosaic law specified that if a man died leaving a widow without a son, it was the responsibility of the man's nearest, male relative to father a son by the widow in order to preserve the family name of the dead man. (Deut. 25) This deed also provided that the property rights remain in that family. In this sense, the kinsman of the dead man became a redeemer for his deceased relative and family.

Now we need to remember that while Boaz was a relative of Ruth's family on the side of Elimelech, he was not the nearest of kin. This he makes known to Ruth, but assures her that he will do all he can to work out the situation with the one person closer in kinship. This to me is a great testimony to the righteousness of Boaz, for he wanted to do what was right according to God's Word!

Boaz then tells Ruth to stay there for the night. I believe he did this because he wanted her to be safe, for the streets of Bethlehem would not be a secure place for a woman at that hour. This she did until just before morning light.

C. Scene Three: Ruth Goes Back to Report to Naomi (3:14-18)

Before sunrise Ruth got up, received some grain from Boaz, and made her way back to her Bethlehem home. She reported all that had transpired including Boaz's promise to resolve the issue of the kinsman-redeemer. Then she presented the gift of grain sent by Boaz to Naomi. We're not sure what was the motive behind the gift of grain, but he certainly didn't go wrong with this kind gesture.
Listen young men, you too cannot go wrong with some kind expressions of devotion made to your sweetheart’s family!

Following this, Naomi tells Ruth to be patient and wait, for Boaz will take care of his promise before the day is over. Next week we will discover what transpired in this matter, but for today I want us to pitch our mental tents on verses ten and eleven of this beautiful story.

II. The Big Idea: Don’t Say “I Do” Until You Know You Are Committing to God’s Partner for Your Life!

Boaz had done his homework on Ruth. He knew that she was “a virtuous woman.” That word “virtuous” in the NKJV may be translated “noble” or “of worth.” A loose translation by Knox gives us the sense of the statement—“a bride worth the winning.” In other words, Boaz knew that Ruth was a woman of excellence and that she would be an excellent partner for marriage.

Today I am speaking specifically to our young people who will one day say “I do” to someone in marriage. Also, I am speaking to those who are about to say “I do” in marriage. Before you commit to someone in this most important union, you need to prayerfully seek God’s will in the matter. From Ruth’s example, permit me to show you what makes for the kind of partner you need in marriage.

A. Someone Who has Experienced Conversion (1:16-17)

Several weeks ago we studied about how God was at work bringing Ruth to faith in Himself. One day she told her mother-in-law Naomi, “your God will be my God.” Most Bible scholars agree that this was a personal decision to turn from
her paganism and become a follower of Yahweh. Thus, she and Boaz believed in the same God.

Today I am concerned that too many earnest believers are marrying unbelievers with the hope of converting them. This is a dangerous decision. The Bible gives us clear teaching and warning on this issue. Hear II Corinthians 6:14:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?

I have seen this happen too many times and usually with bad results. This is especially the case with Christian young women who must afterward deal with the issue of going to church on Sunday or staying at home with the husband she wants to please. Because he is to be the head of the home, and she knows it, she is placed in a difficult position. This is just one example of the kinds of problems that result from a union where two people are fundamentally and spiritually opposite.

However, allow me to hasten to say that it is a great joy in life to have a partner who is fundamentally and spiritually in “oneness” with you. A Christian marriage is like a triangle with the couple representing the bottom corners and God is at the top. The closer each one gets to God, the closer they get to each other. God desires this for every couple. You can experience it if you take care of this issue before you say “I do.”

B. Someone Who Exhibits Character (2:11, 3:10-11)

Character means moral quality, integrity or excellence in personhood. Ruth definitely was a person of excellent character. Boaz knew this to be so. In 2:11 we read where he shared with her the report he had been given as to her selfless,
sacrificial devotion to Naomi. In that chapter also, we see her as a responsible worker who did her work in the harvest field as Boaz had instructed her, and worked along with others without confrontation. Certainly Boaz noted all this in his mind. And then she was known all throughout the town as a woman of high morals and dignity. (3:10-11) Yes, she had an excellent character.

Young people, what I am suggesting today is that someone who is truly a believer, will act like it. Their character will reflect Christ in the way they live and relate to people. I would recommend that you check out their home life, work or school life, and public life. Generally, the way in which they treat others will most likely be the way they will eventually treat you.

The word “character” comes from a Greek word which means to cut or to engrave. When you have a ring or bracelet engraved, the engraver must cut into the metal in order to print a message. If he/she used an ink pen and simply wrote the message on the surface of the jewelry it could eventually be rubbed off.

However, because it is cut into the metal, the message has a long lasting impression. Before you say “I do” to a marriage partner, remember that his or her character goes very deep and will not be changed easily, if changed at all.

C. Someone Who Expresses Commitment (3:9)

Ruth had already expressed commitment to family, this Boaz knew full well. Now she is expressing her desire “to come under his wing.” We can believe that Boaz understood her petition for it sounds very similar in wording to what he had already declared regarding her relationship to God. (2:12). She wants to be
committed to Boaz in marriage and Boaz could easily believe this because of her excellent track record.

Before you say “I do” in marriage, you had better make sure that it is a “wing” you desire and not a fling. Then you had better do all that is possible to determine this about your potential mate. I would recommend some “testing” now before “trial and error” after marriage.

Why not have that boyfriend who desires your hand in marriage to commit to six months or a year to faithful church attendance before you continue any talk of marriage plans? What about asking her to spend fifteen minutes on each date in a devotional study on Biblical principles of dating, courtship and marriage over the course of six months? Friend, this may seem old fashioned and extreme, but after you say “I Do” is a terrible time to discover that he or she was not committed to “death do us part.”

One of the joys of our marriage is that my wife knows that I am committed to her and I know that she is committed to me for life. We are not perfect, just committed!

Conclusion: In closing I want to say a word to our married couples. Dr. Ed Wheat once made a statement that challenged me and I want to leave it on your minds today. He said: “A successful marriage is not so much finding the right person as it is being the right kind of person.” Today, if you would make your marriage better, concentrate on being a person who is converted, committed, and of a Christ-like character.

For you who are preparing for marriage, as you look for God’s mate for your life, focus on being the right kind of person for God’s glory. Seek His mate for your marriage
and then dedicate your marriage to honoring Him. This is His will, and His will is always good, acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).
Title: Ruth and Romans 8:28

Text: Ruth 4

Series: Ruth: God at Work!

Introduction: There is a verse of Scripture that we Bible-believing Christians hold dear. It is a promise from God’s Word which most of us can quote from memory but not all of us know where it is located. In fact, this Scripture is often quoted by unsaved people. They too like to think of it as applying to them, yet it is a promise given only to God’s people.

If I were to tell you the verse I am thinking of you would no doubt say, “Oh, yeh, I know that verse. And, I believe it too.” Yet, sometimes we have a difficult time grasping the truth of this verse for our own life situations. We tend to think that maybe it is a promise which really only applies to religious leaders or so-called “super-spiritual” people. Confidentially we think that it must not work for us who are the so-called “ordinary Christians.”

Well, I’m sure that you would like to know which verse I am speaking of this morning. I’m going to tell you (pause) . . . in a few moments. But first I want to say that the truth of this great verse is written all over the book of Ruth. In other words, the story
of Ruth beautifully illustrates the promise of this Scripture we hold dear. So, I want to recap the main scenes or moves of this story leading up to the wonderful climax in chapter four, and when I quote the verse in mind, I believe you’ll say, “Pastor, you are absolutely right—it is all through this book.” Even more, I believe you’ll agree with me that it applies to ordinary believers just like you and me.

Now that I have your curiosity up, let’s go to the story of Ruth and move to the climax.

I. The Story of Ruth

A. Scene One: Bereavement in Moab (1:1-18)

We first meet Ruth when Naomi and her family moves to Moab to escape their famine stricken land. Naomi, her husband Elimelech, and two sons Mahlon and Chilion, settle down in Moab to wait out the famine.

Soon after their move Elimelech dies leaving Naomi a widow. Following this death both sons marry Moabite girls. Chilion marries Orpah and Mahlon marries our story’s heroine, Ruth. After ten years in Moab both sons also die, leaving three widows in the home. This family has certainly experienced great tragedy.

When Naomi hears that the famine in Israel is over, she decides to move back to her hometown of Bethlehem. Her daughters-in-law want to move with her, but she pleads for them to stay in their homeland where they can marry and find security. Orpah decides to accept her mother-in-laws advice and stay, but Ruth clings to Naomi, refusing to part. And then we hear from her lips that great statement of devotion and faith (read 1:16-17). Ruth became a believer in the Lord God of Israel!
Would Ruth have heard of the one true God if this family had not moved to Moab? Would they have even moved there if there had not been an economic depression in Israel caused by a widespread famine? What if Elimelech had not died in that foreign land, would the family have moved back to Bethlehem without ever meeting Ruth? What if Naomi had decided to stay in Moab? Would Ruth have even considered turning her back on her pagan gods and turn to the true God? Was all of this simple coincidence or just fate? I don’t think Ruth would say so today. I believe she would say “Amen” to the verse I am about to share.

B. Scene Two: Bethlehem at Harvest Time (1:19-2:23)

Next we find Naomi and Ruth moving to Bethlehem “at the beginning of “barley harvest.” Ruth goes right to work in order to support herself and Naomi. Her job was gleaning the left over grain after the reapers had gone through the field. This was the right and privilege of the poor in those days. In fact, the law required that landowners leave grain in the corners of the harvest for this purpose. She worked very hard and God blessed her efforts.

One day she “happened” to come to a field which belonged to a good and Godly man named Boaz. This man was gracious to her in every way. First, he provided her with protection from the men who were hired to reap his fields. Also, he told the men to leave her additional grain to glean. And finally, he allowed her to work in his field all the way to the end of harvest time.

Most people in our world would say, “She sure was lucky!” These folk like to say, “That’s being in the right place at the right time!” I can even hear some of the Bethlehem rabble say, “Some people get all the breaks!”
Would Ruth say this however? Would she say “we ‘happened’ to arrive in Bethlehem at harvest time?” Or would she say, “I happened to come in contact with a man named Boaz?” No, I don’t think so. I believe that this woman, if she could stand before us today, would say that there is something else going on behind the scenes of her life—something or someone bigger than she. She would say that our Scripture promise is exactly as it reads.

C. Scene Three: Midnight at the Threshing Floor (3:1-18)

Toward the end of harvest season Naomi tells Ruth that it is time for her to marry and settle down. She goes on to inform her that she thinks Boaz is the man for her to marry. Ruth accepts Naomi’s advice and choice with gladness.

She is told to go to the Bethlehem threshing floor on a certain evening and let Boaz know that she is available and desires marriage. At midnight, following Naomi’s plan, she slips up to the place where Boaz is guarding his grain. Finding him asleep, she uncovers his feet and this wakes him up immediately. Startled, he asks who is present and Ruth answers with a request that he marry her. Because Boaz was not the kinsman-redeemer at this point, Ruth had to let him know of her desire. It would have been totally inappropriate for him to make the first move.

Boaz receives her request with joy and praise to God. He praises her for her reputation of devotion and integrity. He then assures her that he will do all he can to work things out so that they can be married. Following this he tells her to stay the remainder of the night, probably because of the danger of being alone out on the dark streets of Bethlehem. This she does, but leaves before daylight to go back home to share her news with Naomi.
The love that is growing between this couple is no accident. Their relationship is not as Hollywood would describe it—"magical." The progress of their relationship, from reaping to romance, is the handiwork of a matchmaker more influential than Naomi. If Ruth could stand here and speak to us today she would say, "Go ahead and tell them that wonderful Scripture!" But no, let's wait for the climax. We are almost there.

D. Scene Four: Decision at the City Gate (4:1-12)

Boaz wants to marry Ruth, but there is a legal problem. I spoke on this in our previous message. The Mosaic law required the nearest of kin to marry a widow in order to raise up offspring in the name of the dead husband. This protected the family name and secured his property within that family. This near kinsman would then be a "redeemer" for the widow. Thus, we have the kinsman-redeemer.

Boaz wants to be Ruth's husband, but he is not the nearest of kin. There is another person between him and Ruth. So, this man who has found a virtuous woman to marry, goes to work. By the way, let me say that what is about to happen is a testimony to the righteous character of this great man.

On the following day, after his encounter with Ruth at the threshing floor, Boaz goes to the city gate to handle this business. Because the city gate was where official business was transacted, elders were present for Boaz to deal with his matter. After a while, Ruth's near kinsman walked by and Boaz called him over. Then he called ten elders to witness this discussion. All of this was quite normal and expected in these kinds of matters.
Boaz told the unnamed kinsman that Naomi was going to sell some property which belonged to her dead husband, Elimelech. He offered the kinsman the opportunity to buy the property. This was the proper way of handling a sale of this nature. When the man stated that he would gladly buy the property, Boaz told him that Ruth, the Moabitess also came with the purchase. The kinsman knew that because she too was a widow, he would be required to father a son by her in her dead husband’s name. He then recanted on his decision saying that this would "ruin" his own inheritance. We’re not sure all that he meant but possibly, he didn’t want a woman from Moab, a foreigner, to tangle up the inheritance he would leave to his son or sons. So, he offered Boaz the right to become the redeemer.

In those days they had a strange custom—at least strange to us!—for this type of transferal of rights. The one transferring his right of purchase would remove a sandal from his foot and in the presence of witnesses give it to the one receiving the rights. When the man did so, Boaz officially proclaimed his intention to marry Ruth and become her redeemer. At this pronouncement, all the people at the gate celebrated and pronounced a blessing upon Boaz and Ruth.

Now, did this happen because Boaz was a shrewd businessman? I don’t think so. Yes, he was clever in the way he handled his problem, but remember that the near kinsman could have easily said “yes” to Ruth’s redemption. No my friend, there was a more skilled businessman than Boaz handling this legal matter. He knew the whole situation and had worked it all out from beginning to end.

E. Scene Five: Celebration Over a Birth (4:13-22)

Boaz and Ruth are now married. Nine months or more later a baby boy is born.
They name him Obed and in the final scene of this dramatic story we see Naomi, his grandmother, holding the baby Obed while the neighborhood women gather around her rejoicing.

Then the narrator ends the story with a genealogy. He says that Obed grew to become the father of Jesse and the grandfather of David, king of Israel.

Now we see the big picture. David, Israel’s greatest king, did indeed come from the tribe of Judah. This was the only way he could rightfully assume the throne. This little book of Ruth explains the missing link in David’s genealogy. God was at work, behind all of these experiences, working out His divine plan to bring forth a king.

And yes, He was at work ultimately bringing forth the King of Kings, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of men. You see, the lineage that leads to David also leads to Jesus. This story reminds us that God’s work of providence has universal implications.

II. BIG IDEA: God is providentially at work in our lives accomplishing His will.

I believe that if Naomi, Boaz and Ruth could stand before us today, they would affirm the promise given to us in Romans 8:28. Yes, they could declare that in plenty or in poverty, in life or in death, in faraway places or at home . . . ”all things work together for good to those who love god, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

(Romans 8:28) Why? Because God is at work in the lives of His people accomplishing His great will and purpose.

This is the truth that keeps us going in a world of disappointment, difficulty, disease and death. Yes, sin brings about all of these and more, but our God is greater than these. He ultimately overrules everything because He is sovereign over His world. We are the
objects of His love and we know this because He sent us His Son Jesus to die on a cross as payment for our sins. We know that it is so because He came forth from death’s grave. And yes, He is coming one more time to deliver us, His church, to heaven.

Therefore, regardless of your situation in life, past or present, don’t give up. God is at work! Because He is at work, we should:

A. Look up to heaven and fix our eyes on Christ who is our hope. He who went to the cross for us, will not fail us!
B. Move forward living our lives each day seeking to know and do His will. The will of God is seldom easy and sometimes incomprehensible, but it is always best!
C. Plan to look downward one day from heaven’s perspective and there as the old song says, “we’ll understand it better by and by.”

Conclusion: I close with God’s wonderful promise. I would encourage you to anchor your heart and soul in the harbor of its assurance—“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” Romans 8:28 is clearly proven by the story of Ruth. If you will believe on Jesus as Savior and follow Him as Lord, you life story will prove this promise as well.


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