

**Dr. Steven D. Mathewson,  
Preaching Old Testament Narratives,  
Session 1,  
The Challenge of Preaching Old Testament Narratives**

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in his series on Preaching Old Testament Narratives. This is session number one, The Challenge of Preaching Old Testament Narratives. We are about to begin studying how to preach Old Testament narrative literature, and I'm Steve Mathewson.

It's my privilege to serve you by helping you walk through a process of learning to preach Old Testament narrative. Now you might like to know who I am and why I am doing this. So let me tell you just a little bit about myself. I have been a pastor for about 39 years.

It's hard to believe it's been that long. So I'm a preaching pastor. I preach week in and week out, not every Sunday.

I like to give others the opportunity to preach as well, but that's one of my key roles. So I'm in ministry. I'm preaching regularly.

I also have had the privilege and the opportunity to do a lot of teaching in some seminaries and Bible colleges. I graduated with a master's in Old Testament from Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, and then I moved to Montana, where I went into pastoral ministry. While I was there, I had the opportunity to do a Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and that was with Haddon Robinson.

And out of that, I did my dissertation on the art of preaching Old Testament narrative literature. And I was able to turn that into a book. It's now in its second edition.

It's called The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative, Baker Academic. This is 2021. I first published it in 2003.

If you're familiar at all with preaching books, you might have seen this cover before. This was the original one, and it wasn't bad, but I would highly recommend it if you want to explore more, go into more detail, some of the things that we're talking about in this course. Make sure that you get the most recent edition.

I really wrote this, honestly, to help myself learn what I was doing in preaching Old Testament narrative literature, and I'm happy to pass it on to other pastors and those who are interested in preaching and narratives of the Old Testament. I once

told Dr. Haddon Robinson, "Why don't you write a book on preaching Old Testament narrative? Your book on biblical preaching was so helpful. And he says, I don't want to do that.

Why don't you do that? So I guess I took up the challenge, and I've been working on this topic ever since. Along the way, I guess it was my torturous form of continued education. Even in the middle of pastoral ministry, I got into a Ph.D. program in Hebrew Bible at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, and my advisor there, Christo Vandermeer, was someone whom I had learned a lot from just about how linguistics applies to the study of Old Testament narrative literature.

So I had the opportunity to do Ph.D. work under him, and I did that even while I was working on this second edition. And so I believe that that helped to sharpen me as well. So I guess you could say I've had a foot in both the academy.

I've taught at Western Seminary, my alma mater. In fact, I ran their doctor of ministry program for about I think it was about six years. I was the program director.

I've taught Doctor of Ministry courses there at Denver Seminary, at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and also at Moody Theological Seminary. And currently, I'm an adjunct professor of preaching both at Moody Theological Seminary and at Western Seminary in Portland. So I've had the opportunity to have a foot in that world.

But really, the other foot is in pastoral ministry, and so I really present this to you as a pastor. So let's talk about preaching Old Testament narrative literature. You know, what strikes me is that people love stories.

If you go into a coffee shop, Starbucks, or whatever your favorite coffee shop is, if you listen to conversations, I'm assuming some of you do that, and sometimes in coffee shops, you can't help it. I mean, I know there's a group of people there that have their earbuds in, and they're focused on their smartphone or on their laptop. But sometimes there are groups of people there, and when you hear them talking, they're telling stories, stories about their lives.

People love stories, don't they? And you know what? That's true of the people to whom you preach. James K.A. Smith says that our hearts traffic in stories. I think that's a pretty good description.

I mean, think about it. Stories really disciple us, don't they? Stories plant ideas. They plant emotions in our brains.

What I mean by that is that the stories that we watch or that we hear, they really shape us. It doesn't matter whether it's for movies, cable news, or social media. By the way, even sports.

Sports, you know, you constantly have broadcasters that are looking for the story that's behind the big game. Well, all of this means that we have to learn to preach the narratives of the Old Testament well. That's a really important skill.

And when you think about it, the sheer number of stories in the Old Testament means that it's important to learn how to preach them, and it also gives us an edge as well. According to the most conservative estimates, stories account for up to 30 to 40 percent of the Old Testament. So you can cash in on the stories of David and Ruth and Samson and Jezebel when you stand before people in your congregation who are really shaped and geared by stories.

I like what theologian R.C. Sproul, the late R.C. Sproul, once said. He says, I'm big on preaching from narratives because people will listen 10 times as hard to a story as they will to an abstract lesson. So it seems like, wow, we have a huge advantage when it comes to preaching.

But, unfortunately, it's not that simple. Preachers often neglect the narratives, the stories of the Old Testament, or like beginners playing the saxophone or the trumpet, if you've ever listened to a fourth or fifth grader learning to play those instruments, it can be kind of painful, right? Sometimes that's how we preach these narratives. We preach them, but we preach them poorly, like beginners.

So neither problem, either neglect for narrative or preaching them poorly, says much about our reverence for the Word of God, let alone our love for the people to whom God has called us to preach. So this series of lectures is all about learning to preach Old Testament narrative literature more effectively. Now, where do we start? Well, I think a good place to start is to identify why we struggle with Old Testament stories. Why do we say we shine in the letter to the Ephesians, but when it comes to 1 Samuel, wow, we struggle? I think answering that question will help get us back on track and maybe reveal some needs or some areas that need adjustment.

So there are some factors that contribute to our poor performance. Number one is that we view stories as fluff. Maybe that's why a lot of us in the churches that we grew up in, or that we're in now, tend to gravitate towards the New Testament epistles.

By the way, I love the New Testament epistles. Sometimes people will say, "Well, what's your favorite book of the Bible? And it usually tends to be the one that I'm preaching at the moment or the one that I'm studying. And I absolutely love the epistles.

But for whatever reason, the churches that I grew up in, and a lot of churches I'm familiar with, that's what we're teaching. We spend time in Romans and Galatians and Ephesians, and maybe we get into Peter's letters, but that's all we do. And one of the reasons is that we view stories as fluff.

You know, it strikes me a lot of churches teach Bible stories to the kids who are down in the basement or in the Christian education wing of the church, while Paul's epistles are what the big people upstairs study. Wesley Cord explains why we sell narrative short, and I'd like to read you what he says. He says, Generally, we hold narrative to be optional, to be a matter of taste rather than of necessity.

We may even disdain narrative as a form of discourse more suited for children than for adults or more for ancient and otherwise underdeveloped people than for the educated and sophisticated. And I've seen that in the churches I've pastored. You know, I've pastored in Montana for about 20 years, and I was in both a university community, but I was also in a rural community.

So I had everybody from, you know, cowboys to university professors in the church where I served. And then I moved to the suburbs, the north suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, and had a lot of chemical engineers, a lot of PhDs in science in our church. We were located right near a lot of some of the major pharmaceutical companies.

But what I found in all of them is that, you know, they want their facts, give me a bullet point list, you know, give me something that's tightly argued. And there is this kind of disdain for story. Stories are for kids.

And yet, as a number of Bible teachers and theologians have argued, stories are important. N.T. Wright, for example, argues that stories are one of the most basic modes of human life. And he says that stories are often wrongly regarded as a person's substitute for the real thing.

And he points out that they don't exist merely to illustrate a point. In fact, there's a growing number of Old Testament scholars who recognize that there are strong wisdom agendas that are incorporated into the Old Testament narratives. So as a result, Eugene Peterson, the late Eugene Peterson, I had the privilege to get to know him when I lived in Montana because he lived in Montana as well.

And he challenged pastors who looked down on stories. He says, "Why is the story often dismissed as not quite adult? But why, among earnest pastors, is the story looked down upon as not quite serious? And his answer to that, he says, is ignorance. It's ignorance, mostly.

The story is the most adult form of language, the most serious form into which language can be put. And so he argues that pastors who have the responsibility for keeping the words of Scripture active in the minds of their listeners, in the minds, the memories of the faith community that they serve, he said, an appreciation for story is imperative because so much of God's truth is communicated to us in narrative or story. So that's the first reason why we sometimes struggle with Old Testament narratives.

We look down on stories. We view them as fluff for kids, but they're not. A second reason is that we get frustrated by the subtlety of narrative.

If you've spent much time reading narrative, you understand that narratives make their point in a more subtle way. They typically show us rather than tell us. Sometimes I think they're like a dot-to-dot picture where you have to connect the dots in order to get the picture.

And that indirect approach frustrates a lot of people who want a text to state its point in a direct way. By the way, I think that's why some people just prefer Paul's epistles. Not that Paul is always easy to understand.

In fact, Peter says that, doesn't he, in 2 Peter 3.16 that some of his writings are hard, but at least he lays it out on the table. And even in a long sentence, he has some long ones. Ephesians 1, 3-14, it's over 200 words.

But at least he lays things out in a rather direct way. Haddon Robinson, who is my mentor and really one of the deans of biblical preaching, says, why didn't God just come out right out and say what he meant and not beat around the bush with stories? That's a question that we often get asked. Well, that's the struggle, isn't it? It's so subtle.

And sometimes, when it's subtle, maybe that means that our interpretation might feel more subjective. There's a third reason why we struggle with Old Testament narratives, and that is that we minimize the role of Old Testament stories in the canon. In the past, some Bible expositors turned to the Old Testament and its narratives only for illustrations of New Covenant truth.

And I remember reading a preaching textbook that said that about narrative, that you shouldn't rely on it for doctrine. You go to the New Testament, you go to the epistles for that, but these stories are wonderful illustrations of New Testament truth. There's a scholar by the name of David Duhal who offers a needed corrective.

He says, using Old Testament narrative only to illustrate New Testament teaching, however, results in ignoring much Old Testament instruction that may serve as a background for New Testament theology, or else as teaching not repeated in the

New Testament. Creation law and covenant are in the Old Testament narrative, which, if ignored or used for illustrations only, will create many problems of biblical imbalance. An adequate theological framework must include the whole Old Testament.

And then he quotes 2 Timothy 3.16, which reminds us that all Scripture is God-breathed, and it's profitable for doctrine, rebuke, for correcting, for training in righteousness, that the man or the woman of God might be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. But it's all Scripture, and that includes the Old Testament. Another one of my favorite Old Testament scholars, Ian Provan, concurs when he says, all historiography is also, in some sense, ideological literature.

That's a tough one, isn't it? Big words there. All historiography, so all history writing, is also, in some sense, ideological literature. That is, it's making a point.

That doesn't make it any less historical. We have that today. I grew up in the state of Illinois in the United States, and one of its heroes would be Abraham Lincoln.

And I've read a lot of books on Lincoln, biographies. One that I read in recent years was Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *A Team of Rivals*. It's a brilliant book about how Lincoln gathered some of his political enemies around him and made them part of his cabinet.

One was just to keep tabs on them, but also, he wasn't too proud to hear the other side and to get expertise. And so that's one book. Then I read another book called *Lincoln's Sword*, which is about the way that he used his speech to make a point.

Now, both of those books are historical. They deal with facts, but they're also ideological. Doris Kearns Goodwin selects certain facts from the life of Abraham Lincoln to make the point that here was a guy who really knew how to bring the right leaders around him, and he wasn't intimidated by people who disagreed with him, even his political rivals.

On the other hand, the author of *Lincoln's Sword* dealt with the same historical facts, but picked and chose some others to make a different point. And the idea is, neither of them violated the history, but they chose history to make a point. And that's exactly what the authors of the Old Testament narrative do.

They have all of these facts from A to Z at their approval, and they might pick B and C and then F and G and L and a few others, because those are the historical details that make the point they want to make. I always remind my students that one of the sections in what we call the historical books in our English Bible, these books are actually part of a collection in the Hebrew Bible known as the Former Prophets. And that would be Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

Those four books. And of course, in English, we have 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings. But Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, those four books are the Former Prophets.

That means they're delivering a prophetic message. So we must understand when we're reading these narratives that they're doing something more than we think. That's important because there's been a movement recently just saying, well, maybe we should unhitch from the Old Testament.

A very influential pastor, Andy Stanley, has asked followers of Jesus to consider, in his words, unhitching their teaching of what it means to follow Jesus from all things Old Covenant. That means Old Testament, end of quote. And that includes his narratives.

And he says we need to do that for the next generation's faith. He says if we're anchoring our story to the Old Testament or Old Covenant narrative and worldview, we lose our case in the marketplace, in the real world, the world where science is gospel and folks are growing more and more skeptical of things religious. Now, I'm sympathetic with the concern that he raises, but I think that's a terrible solution to unhitch ourselves from the Old Testament.

I think other scholars like Brent Strawn have shown us that the new way forward is to learn the entire language of the Old and New Testaments together, how they work together. And only then can we challenge misreadings of the Old Testament. So that's another reason why we struggle with Old Testament narratives, which is that we minimize their role in the canon.

We may not think that they're very important. Number four, let's face it, we get intimidated by the language and the literature of the Old Testament, don't we? I mean, it's just a practical issue, isn't it? The language and the literature of the New Testament seem more manageable. By the way, I love the New Testament.

I love studying Greek, even as I love studying Hebrew. I remember a New Testament professor once told me, I asked him, why didn't you go into New Testament? I was trying to decide where I fit. Am I going to focus on anything? And he says, well, he says, I did it because learning Greek was easier than learning Hebrew. And he says, I just found that there was a smaller slice of history that I had to know for the New Testament, rather than this broad scope in the Old Testament.

So I get that. I think choosing the New Testament studies over Old Testament studies resembles a citizen of the United States specializing in United States history, rather than the history of Western civilization or world history in general. I mean, the sheer size of the Old Testament, its length, the difficulty in learning Hebrew, although I might argue with that.

I think Hebrew can be a lot of fun once you get working with it. But I understand it. It can be very challenging.

Finally, number five, another reason we struggle is that we get enslaved to a particular style of expository preaching. We get enslaved to a particular homiletical method. And maybe this is tied in a bit to why we often preach New Testament epistles.

I don't know which is the horse or the cart here. But the challenge is, we find a way that we think might work for the New Testament letters. And we often choose a very analytical style.

By the way, that's not always the best way to preach a New Testament letter. But because these are very tightly argued letters, maybe they lend themselves a little bit more to analysis. So when we come to an Old Testament narrative, we may try to do the same thing, and the results can be disastrous.

I like what one preaching professor argues, Don Wardlaw, when he says, when preachers feel they have not preached a passage of Scripture, unless they have dissected and rearranged that word into a lawyer's brief, they in reality make the Word of God subservient to one particular technical kind of reason. And I think we have to be honest about that. Sometimes that's what we do.

Again, evangelical preachers, and I grew up in this tradition, seemed to like this caption survey form. Basically, we go through our sermon, and we have a series of points in our analytical outline, and we state those prominently so people taking notes can write those down. I remember the first sermon series I ever preached on an Old Testament narrative book, which, thankfully, I think those recordings have long been lost.

I preached my way through 1 Samuel, and let me give you an example of the outline that I used on 1 Samuel 7. I chewed my way through the narrative using this outline. So point number one was the repentance of God's people. And when I preached, I said, in verses 2 through 6, we see the repentance of God's people.

The repentance of God's people. You have to repeat it. The second point was the victory of God's people.

The third point was the resulting prosperity of God's people. My first three sub-points, I mean, I did this with sub-points. So under repentance of God's people in verses 2 to 6 of 1 Samuel 7, I had the determination to seek the Lord, the decree to put away idols, and the decision to offer confession.

And notice that I picked words that start with the letter D. I got determination, decree, decision, so I've got the alliteration. And then I even had kind of stated them in parallel. The determination to seek the Lord, the decree to put away idols, the decision to offer confusion.

And it's beautiful, isn't it? But that's not how narratives work. That's not how stories work. And I've had to learn to, you know, abandon that approach when it comes to a narrative.

I mean, let's face it, the recipe for a sermon like this is pretty simple, isn't it? It's to slice the text into an analytical outline, season the points with parallelism, sprinkle them with some alliteration, serve for 30 to 35 minutes, and fill in the blank outline projected on the big screens. Now, that's not an overblown character. I mean, this approach is popular when I begin pastoral ministry, and it's still that way four decades later.

You know, a while ago, I checked the website of a prominent Midwestern evangelical church, and their senior pastor, a leader in the denomination, made his sermon available in sermon notes and in an audio format. And I admire that. I'm not at all trying to disparage him or make fun of what he's doing.

I'm just saying, this is the approach we're used to. So I clicked on some of his outlines, and one of his outlines, and this was in an Old Testament narrative, the first point was the vilification of God's glory. Now, if you're an English speaker, when's the last time you used the word vilification? Or have you even seen that in print, or have you watched a movie on Netflix? Nobody uses a word like that.

But then I realized, oh, he needed a V-word. So he had the vilification of God's glory, the vindication of God's glory, and the vengeance by God's glory. I remember I had a classmate who did something similar to that in a class I had in Robinson.

We'll talk about that a little bit later in our course when we talk about outlining. The problem, though, is that good storytellers do not convey their stories through analytical outlines. Now, I'm going to argue as we move forward that we do need an outline, but I'm going to tell you how that works.

I think it works more like a skeleton. I need my skeleton to sit here and to teach you today, but you don't need to see my skeleton, do you? I think that's how outlines work. We're going to talk about that as we move forward.

All right, so what's our strategy going to be? Those are the reasons that we struggle, but what's our strategy going to be as we move forward? Well, we're going to cover the hermeneutical or exegetical side of preaching. Then we'll also deal with the homiletical side of preaching. So here you've got the hermeneutical, exegetical.

All that means is we're going to study the text. We have to learn how to interpret narrative literature, the way that it's communicated. But then once we do that, once we know, okay, what's the writer communicating, then we have to think about how we're going to preach it.

How do we craft a sermon based on our understanding of the text? All right, here are a couple of clarifications before we wrap up this first session. First of all, the process of developing an expository message from an Old Testament narrative text should be fluid and artistic. By the way, I've been talking about expository preaching, a lot of different approaches to that, but at its heart, expository preaching works through blocks of biblical text and books.

It works through passages of scripture, and it unpacks those. It exposes the meaning. But what I'm saying is this process for both studying the text and then proclaiming it needs to be fluid and artistic.

You must develop a feel for it. However, to learn the process, you do have to break it down into its component parts. Years ago, when I first learned how to drive, my driver's education manual broke down a left-hand turn into at least 10 steps.

It might have been 12. I don't remember exactly. But at the time, I thought that was the dumbest thing I've ever heard.

I mean, really? 10 steps? So when I'm going to make a left-hand turn, I've got to think through 10 steps? I'm probably going to get into an accident. Well, there was a method to that madness, and what I realized later is that by breaking the process down, it helped me learn the fundamentals correctly. So learning to preach an Old Testament narrative works the same way.

At first, they might seem a little bit mechanical, but we're doing that so that we can eventually reassemble them into a fluid artistic motion. All right, so that's the first thing. Secondly, here's a word about studying narrative text in Hebrew.

I realize that you may or may not have studied biblical Hebrew, and if you have not studied biblical Hebrew, I want you to realize that you can still understand these narratives. That doesn't have to be a liability. We have a lot of good tools that can help you, and if you read your English Bible carefully, if you compare some translations, you're going to be fine.

So relax. You don't have to be an expert in biblical Hebrew. You don't have to know biblical Hebrew in order to preach narrative effectively.

However, if you have the opportunity to learn to study Hebrew, that will give you an edge. Thankfully, the easiest kind of literature to read in the Hebrew Bible is, guess what? It's narrative. In fact, that's the same way in the New Testament for Greek, especially Matthew's Gospel, which kind of unfolds a lot like a Hebrew narrative.

It's just written in Greek, but the stories of the Bible are the easiest things to read in the original languages. So if you were to study the Old Testament, if you were to study Hebrew, I can guarantee you, just about guarantee you, that one of the first books that you will work on will be the book of Or I remember when I first learned Hebrew, we worked a lot on Jonah, because Jonah's narrative, and those are shorter books. But narrative is, hey, it's a lot easier to read than some of the poetry in Isaiah, and even some of the Psalms.

So again, if you don't know Hebrew, don't panic. You can still understand what a narrative is saying. If you do know Hebrew at any level, you'll be able to use it, and you'll be able to use it skillfully.

But before we start thinking about how to preach or how to study Old Testament narrative, we need to talk about the Christ-centered preaching debate, and we will do that in our next session. This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in a series on preaching Old Testament narratives. This is session number one, the challenge of preaching Old Testament narratives.