Dr. Steven D. Mathewson,
Preaching Old Testament Narratives,
Session 5: Overview of the Exegetical Process [ACTS]:
Analyzing the Setting and Conclusions

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in his teaching on Preaching Old Testament Narratives. This is session number five, Overview of the Exegetical Process, Acts, Analyzing the Setting and Conclusions.

In this session, we're going to wrap up our exegetical study, and we're going to draw some conclusions.

Remember that understanding a narrative means looking at the acts, A-C-T-S, A stands for action or plot, C stands for characters, T stands for talking, and the final step in the process is to look at the setting, the S is setting. There are two issues related to the setting. One covers the specific time and place and culture in which a story occurs, but the other issue concerns the position of the story within the larger flow of stories that make up a book, and really, these issues resemble those faced by students who research a battle in the American Civil War.

If I intend to understand the Battle of Gettysburg, which I've always been interested in, my grandparents had a farm a couple of hours north of Gettysburg, and so I visited there as a boy, and I visited a few other times through my life in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. But if I'm going to understand that battle, I have to look at two settings. So the first setting consists of the actual location and time period of the battle.

So it turns out that the Union and Confederate forces converged unintentionally at the little town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 1st, 1863, and the battle went on for three days. It ended on July 3rd with Major General George Pickett's fateful charge. And students who study this battle will go into even more detail.

They'll look at the topographical features, places like Cemetery Ridge and Round Top, Little Round Top, Devil's Den, and Seminary Ridge. Those are the places where the battle happened. So they're looking at the place and the time where this battle took place.

The second setting, though, consists of the position of that battle in the overall flow of the Civil War. So as it turns out, the battle occurred roughly in the middle of the Civil War, which started in 1861 and ended in 1865. The Union victory at Gettysburg, coupled with Grant's victory at Vicksburg, really reversed the war.

I mean, it was a turning point in the war. And even more significant is what happened in the aftermath of Gettysburg. The Union General, George Meade, missed his chance to finish off Lee's army and end the war.

And his caution in pursuing Lee gave Lee's troops time to recoup from their exhaustion and escape to Virginia. It's possible the war could have ended there, but instead it went on for a couple more years. So again, if you're going to understand the Battle of Gettysburg, you have to look at the place and time where it happened, but you also have to look at the larger picture.

And that's what we have to do when we study an Old Testament narrative. We have to pay close attention to both the historical and cultural setting, the place and the time where something happened, but we also have to look at what we call the literary setting. Where does this narrative show up in the flow of the book or in the flow of what's going on in the Old Testament? And so both those settings are really important.

So let's talk first about the historical and cultural setting. We discover this by asking and answering some really important questions. First of all, where did the story happen? The writer will often tell us where that happens.

If not in that particular narrative, if we go back a couple of chapters, we can get an idea where this is taking place. Is there any significant geographical movement within the story? Yeah. What time of year did this take place? So, when did it happen, and what was happening in Israel at this time? Robert Chisholm was a fine Old Testament scholar, and he says that while the details of the physical setting serve merely to lend realism to the story or create a mood, he says that other times those same details can have symbolic value or even contribute to the story's theme.

So, for example, in 2 Kings 1.9, he says that the king's arrogant officer demands that the prophet Elijah come down from his perch on the top of a hill, and Elijah refuses to come down and instead calls fire down on this officer and his men. And it turns out that Elijah's elevated position really symbolizes his authority as God's spokesman over the king and his messengers. In the book of Ruth, the movement of the setting from Israel to Moab, remember we talked about that, Elimelech, my God is king, really turned his back on God as his king by taking the family from Israel to Moab, but then came back to Israel.

So by leaving Israel for Moab, he's essentially abandoning the covenant community in search of a solution to his hunger. Furthermore, when you read the timestamp in verse one, it says in chapter one, verse one, it says in the days when the judges ruled, you say, ah, aha, yeah, this is, this was a morally dark time in Israel's history. So it even suggests to us that the physical problem Elimelech sought to escape was famine, but that was due to a spiritual problem.

So that's where these historical cultural details can happen. Second Kings 11 and 12, the story of David's sin with Bathsheba, identifies the story's beginning as the springtime when kings typically go out to war. So we expect to find King David going with the Israelite army and joining them on the battlefield, but to our surprise, we learned that David remained in Jerusalem, which leads to a crisis.

So that's the historical cultural setting. That's very important to look at because that shapes our understanding of a narrative, but we also have to look at the literary setting. Where is this narrative placed within the larger story? And that is really critical.

Here, here's a simple example in first Kings chapter three, verses 16 through 18. This is the story of Solomon and the two prostitutes. And he was able to determine, remember they came to him, and they had each had babies, but one baby died during the night, and both were claiming the live baby.

And remember what his solution was. He says, "We'll bring the baby here, and I'll cut it in half and give a half to each of you. But of course, that's not what he intended to do.

He did that because he knew that would reveal the real mother, her heart. She would cry out. Then she did.

She says, no, you know, give this baby to the other woman. I'd rather he lived. And Solomon says, there's the mother.

What's interesting is that the narrative follows another story. First Kings three, one through 15, which narrates or tells us how God gave Solomon a wise and discerning heart. So you have that account of God giving Solomon a wise and discerning heart.

And then you have this next story, which really has a verifying function, which says, okay, look, just so you know, Solomon got what he asked for. This confirms it. Here's an example.

I've referred in a previous session to the story of David and Abigail and Nabal in first Samuel 25. That's fascinating because that story is sandwiched between two stories in which David has an opportunity in the wilderness and a cave to take the life of King Saul. And in both occasions, David refuses to take revenge against Saul in the final story in chapter 26.

He says, "How can I lay a hand on the Lord's anointed? That would be wrong.” He recognizes that. So we look at David and say, "Wow, that's amazing.”

David has the spiritual presence to know that he cannot take revenge against the Lord's anointed. But how about taking revenge against the fool? So right in the middle of those two narratives, you have this Nabal narrative where David is tempted. And if it weren't for Abigail talking him out of that, he could have just wrecked his opportunity to be recognized by the people as the king that he was anointed to be.

So the positioning of that story makes it even more powerful. I mean, it's powerful on its own. First Samuel 25, you know, David realizes he shouldn't take revenge.

That could wreck everything. But I think it's even more powerful when you realize that it's sandwiched right between two stories where he knows he can't take revenge against the king. And that tells us David still has more to learn.

So that's a pretty powerful, yeah, it's a pretty powerful understanding when we're paying attention to the literary setting. I've also talked about Genesis 38. That's another narrative where we have to understand the literary setting.

A lot of interpreters have been confused by that. In fact, some. I did a lot of work on Genesis 38 a few years ago, and I found some kind of wild statements.

One interpreter called it a rude interruption of the Joseph story. I found a British interpreter who said this is like a dog among nine pins. So think about bowling pins and imagine the dog.

If you set up bowling pins outside, maybe you've got plastic bowling pins on your driveway because you have some neighbors over and you're playing some lawn games, and your dog comes running through those pins, they're all going to fall down. And this guy said, yeah, that's basically what Genesis 38 does. Some say, yeah, this just interrupts the story.

Why is this here? Well, this chapter heightens the tension. I mean, it interrupts the story of Joseph just as Joseph has been sold into prison. And so we're wondering, oh, what's going to happen next? Then we get Genesis 38.

But it's not only there to delay the story, just to raise suspense. What we find is that Judah is kind of a foil to Joseph. Remember, we talked about a foil, a contrast.

So Joseph has been, you know, in prison, but it's, well, he will, he's been in prison. He's been sold to the Midianites. And then you come to Genesis 39, and he's actually put into prison.

When things start going well, he's serving in the house of Potiphar, a very important person in Egypt. And then Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him. And when Joseph says,

no, how can I do this great evil and sin against the Lord? He gets tossed into prison because she makes a claim, falsely accuses him.

Now, contrast that with Judah. Remember, Judah was the one who couldn't control his sexual urges. And so these stories, I believe, are set aside so that we see the contrast between them.

And they're part of a bigger story in Genesis 37 to 50. That often gets called the Joseph story, but that's not what the biblical writer calls it. Genesis 32, this is the account of Jacob.

And there are two main players in this account. One is Joseph. And yes, there are more stories, more content about Joseph.

But Judah plays a key role. And by the time you get to the end of Genesis 49, you realize, whoa, the line through which the blessing is going to go, the line to which the Messiah is going to come, is Judah, not Joseph. So, again, pay attention to where Genesis 38 fits in the story.

And even this larger story in Genesis of God developing a nation through which he would bless the earth through Abraham, Genesis 38, fits into that. I've talked about Judges 17 and 18. Again, I think the placement is fascinating there.

The book of Judges has a really interesting structure. We often think of Judges as what we might call having all of these cycles. They're not exactly cycles, though.

There's a downward spiral that runs from chapter 3 and verse 7 all the way through the end of chapter 16. So you have these downward spirals. And the theme of the book of Judges is, Dan Block calls it, the canonization of Israel.

In other words, Israel became just like its pagan neighbors, just like the Canaanites did. And that's tragic. What you have in the introduction to the book is you've got two problems.

The book opens with the problem of what we would call the problem of war. And it gets a little bit more complicated than that. There's a Hebrew word that has to do with things that are devoted to God.

And the war that Israel was to fight was all tied up in that. So you have the problem of war and then the problem of idols. So the problem of war, the problem of idols.

Then you have this big section of this downward spiral. And then you come to Genesis 17 through 21. And guess what? It's a mirror image of the introduction in, I didn't say Genesis, I meant Judges.

Judges 1.1 through 3.6. So you come to Judges 17 to 21. And remember, at the beginning, you've got the problem of war, the devoted things, and the problem of idols. Now it's just the opposite.

At the end, in 17 and 18, you've got a narrative about the problem with idolatry. And we see that it's gotten worse. And then in 19 through 21, the problem of war.

And it's even worse, too, because now Israel is fighting itself. Really fascinating how that book is put together. By the way, even in the downward spiral section, with every narrative about one of those deliverers, they're called Judges, but they're more saviors, deliverers, than anything else.

With each one of those, we see things getting worse. So we're always trying to look at the literary setting. Where does this passage fall within a particular book of the Bible? And sometimes even looking at where a book falls.

And those become very important. All right, so we've looked at action, we've looked at characters, we've looked at talking, and we've looked at setting. Those are the big categories.

Those are the big buckets that you want to be aware of as you're reading a narrative. Initially, you may just have to have that list on a piece of paper, or have that in your head, and think A-C-T-S, action, characters, talking, setting. Eventually, the more you work with that, you're just going to read that; it's going to be kind of automatic.

Those categories will come up subconsciously as you read. So really, what we're doing is we're training ourselves to read things differently. Think back, just contrast that with the way that you might study, say, Paul's letter to the Colossians, or that you might study 1 Peter, or one of the New Testament letters.

It's a little bit different, isn't it? We're looking at some different things. By the way, some people reduce Bible studies simply to word studies. And words are important, but you're going to find that in Old Testament narrative, other than certain key words, or looking at repeated words, that there are some other things you need to pay attention to.

All right, now we need to draw some conclusions. And this is the challenge, because you've got all of this understanding, all of this material, you've analyzed the action, you've analyzed the characters, you've analyzed the talking, you've analyzed the setting. Well, now we need to summarize and to say, okay, so what is the theological message that the writer is communicating through this particular narrative? What point is the Spirit of God making? What is the ethical thrust? That is, what are God's

people being challenged to do through the telling of this story? And this is where I'm an advocate for identifying the big idea of a narrative.

Again, it doesn't mean that there's only one idea, but what's the peg? What's the central idea on which everything else hangs? What is the unifying center? Now, what that means is, we probably need to go back and review a little bit about the components of an idea. And Haddon Robinson, who, the late Haddon Robinson, who was one of the leading preachers and teachers of preachers in the 20th century and maybe the beginning of the 21st, in his book, Biblical Preaching, he kind of lays out a process for discovering the big idea of any passage, and I find that this works really well for narrative. Now, I will admit, the first time I read Dr. Robinson's book, Biblical Preaching, and I read this material on the big idea, I thought, "Oh, please, all this busy work, I just want to preach the Bible, why do I have to do this? But over the years, as I matured, I realized this is a way of thinking, and this is a way of thinking myself clear.

Because I don't know about you, if you've ever done a lot of exegesis and all of a sudden you have to try to summarize, what's the message? Like, well, where do you even start? Well, Haddon says that any idea has both a subject and a complement, and the place to start is the subject. The subject is not the grammatical subject; it's not just the topic, but he defines it. He says a subject is, well, what the writer is talking about. And Haddon Robinson always suggested that we state that subject as a question that begins with either who, what, why, when, where, or how. Kind of the journalistic questions that you may have learned when you were in, even in high school, Rudyard Kipling had kind of a famous statement about those questions.

But Robinson said, so as you read a passage, as you study a passage, what's the subject? You know, what's the writer talking about? And state that as a question beginning with who, what, why, when, where, or how. And then, you've got the subject, then the answer to that question is called the complement, and that would be C-O-M-P-L-E-M-E-N-T. It's like the word complete, that's the idea.

It's not the complement, C-O-M-P-L-I-M-E-N-T. That's when you say to somebody, "Hey, that was a great meal, or thanks for taking me, that was a great restaurant. You sure have good taste.

Well, you've given them a compliment. That's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about something that completes it.

So, subject and complement, the subject is what I am talking about? The complement is what am I saying about? What am I talking about? So again, we're going back, and we're looking at all of that material, all of the insights that we've gained about the action, the characters, the talking, and the setting. And now we're trying to distill it in one sentence: What is the author's main point? Big idea doesn't

say everything there is to say about a passage, but it's important that we're able to get clarity on that. I think we probably do that more than we think.

Anytime we are reading any document, we're looking for what the author intended. And if we can summarize that, we'll be in a lot better shape. So I'll give you some examples of that.

By the way, the subject, as I said, is not just a topic. So you might hear a message. Somebody says, "Well, what's the message about? You might say, well, it's about sin.

Like Haddon Robinson tells a story of Calvin Coolidge, President Coolidge, who went to church one day and came back to the White House. And his wife said, " What's the sermon about? And he said, "Sin." And she says, "well, what did the preacher say about it?" He says, "Well, he was against it."

That's what he got out of the sermon. But it's not enough to say, well, the subject is sin. What we're looking for is the writer answering the question, why do we commit sin? Or what do we do when we sin? Or how can we overcome sin? That's what we have to do.

We have to press on a little further. So the first thing that we want to do is to state this in an exegetical expression. And this can be a little bit confusing.

But if you think about our process, we've studied this. We want to state this in an exegetical way that talks about them. We're using the language.

We might be using David, Abraham, the Israelites, the Philistines, or whoever we have. So in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12, if you were to say, take Paul Borden, who was a very prominent teacher of preachers. He taught with Haddon Robinson and did a lot of good work on narrative.

And as he worked with 2 Samuel 11 and 12, the subject of 2 Samuel 11 and 12, according to Paul Borden, would be, "What does David have to learn about responding to the grace of God? That's his subject. And then the compliment he gives is that he must accept what the grace of God has given him and what the grace of God is not. And so when he puts that together, his exegetical idea is that David learns to accept what the grace of God is not.

And you might say, well, yeah, but the story was about David committing adultery. And isn't that how to avoid adultery? Yeah. When you read on, you realize that David's problem was that he didn't accept what God in his grace had given him.

Uriah had the sense to do that. Uriah is the hero of the story, but David isn't. And as you read on into chapter 12, you find out that David didn't accept what God said to him. You find out that David learns that lesson.

God could have gotten rid of David and just, you know, given away his throne. Of course, there were some serious consequences in the years to come, but you find out that David really does learn how to respond to the grace of God. So I think that's, I think that's helpful.

By the way, most of the subjects of sermons like this are how to avoid adultery or what the consequences of adultery are. But I don't think that's what the biblical writer is doing here. No, the biblical writer wants us to see what David learns about the grace of God.

So that's kind of what we're doing. And then we have to bring that over into timeless language. And so when we have a homiletical or a preaching idea, we're going to state that in a way that is true for people of all time.

And that can get tricky because, you know, how do we know that what applies to David applies exactly to us? I mean, was that just for kings? Because David was a king. I'm not a king. I'm not the president of a country.

So how does this apply to me? We'll talk a little bit in another session about that application move. But the point is, we stated exegetically, but then we're going to bring it over from that language. We're going to put it in the now language or timeless language.

How does this apply to God's people now? So we can go back to what, you know, Paul Borden's big idea. And I think it would be legitimate to say, when we run that through the rest of Scripture and through the lens of Jesus teaching and the apostles teaching, I think it's legitimate to say that we have to learn to accept what the grace of God has given us and what the grace of God has not. Because God gives each of us certain blessings and really so much of Scripture, even going back to the Ten Commandments, "You shall not covet.

That was the heart of David's sin, wasn't it? And the New Testament talks about that too. James talks about that as one of the root problems. We desire what we don't have, and we insist that we should have this and that becomes the problem.

So that's one of the skills that we need to learn. And I really believe that this big idea approach works really well with narrative. Now, occasionally, and I think this is very sparing though, occasionally you might say, yeah, but I think you've got a subject here, but I think maybe instead of just one compliment, there are two or three.

And sometimes you can preach it that way if you think there are two or three compliments, you can do that. Haddon Robinson has a category for that. He does that.

But I think we have to be really careful because we want to turn everything into a list, don't we? And I think it's often more precise to say, now, wait a minute, this is what the biblical writer is zeroing in on. So do you see how this approach works? We're not just going after a list of principles and five insights about prayer or six insights about burnout from Elijah's story in 1 Kings 19. But we're really trying to say, all right, what is the narrator doing with this narrative? And as we look at the theme of a particular book, how does this narrative fit into that? Now, here are a couple more things that might help us in identifying the big idea of a passage.

And this, again, comes from Haddon Robinson. One is what he talks about, the vision of God. And what he says is that most passages, and I would agree that this is true of narrative as well, most of them will focus on a particular aspect of God's character.

You go back to 1 Samuel 17 and even listen to some of the things that David said about the living God. When you finish reading 1 Samuel, if you said, "Well, what's the vision of God? What aspect of God's character is on display? And I would say that the aspect of God's character that's on display is God's life-giving power, that God is more powerful than any other force, and that God gives his people and his leaders the strength to carry out the mission that he's given to them. In 2 Samuel 11 and 12, I think the narrator's vision of God is that God is the giver of gifts.

I mean, that's the issue in the text. Nathan's message begins with, "Remember when the prophet Nathan was sent to confront David? That's in chapter 12. And what does he do? He begins with a litany of gifts that God has given to David.

So he's giving you this, he's giving you this and this and this and this, but he hasn't given you Bathsheba. And that's why Paul Borden describes this gift-giving as God's grace. So the vision of God in 2 Samuel 11 and 12 is that God is the giver of gifts, or he is the God of grace.

And I find that really helpful to identify what aspect of God's character is really on display in this particular narrative. And that really helps me get to the big idea. Again, sometimes it's going to be easier.

It's a little bit more on the surface. Other times, you may have to do a little bit more thinking and wrestling with it, but it's there. It really is there.

All right, the other thing that you want to look at is what Haddon Robinson called the depravity factor. And the depravity factor is the sin or the rebellion that, maybe the

temptation to rebel that we face, and that's what the text is getting at. In other words, it's the problem.

It's the problem, the sin that we're tempted to commit. What sin keeps God's people from responding properly to an aspect of his character? Very similar to what Brian Chappell calls the fallen condition focus in his book on Christ-centered preaching. So when you go back to 2 Samuel 11 and 12, the depravity factor is David's tendency and our tendency, my tendency, to despise God by being discontent with the gifts he has given.

So here's this big circle of gifts that God has given me, but I want what's out here, so much so that I'll disobey if I have to get it. That's the depravity factor that's going on in this chapter. So sometimes determining the big idea resembles splitting wood.

Sometimes you get stuck in a knot. Have you ever had that happen? When I lived in Montana, we had a wood-burning stove in a couple of the houses in which we lived, and I would go out on those cold mornings, and sometimes I would split firewood so that it was small, or we could put it in the wood stove, and sometimes, boy, you'd hit it, it would just split instantly, and you'd think, wow, I'm pretty strong. Then on the next one, it would hit a knot, and it would take forever to split that, and sometimes that's the way it feels like with the big idea.

But I think the way to get out of that knot is saying, okay, what's the story's vision of God, and what's the depravity factor that works against that vision? And those clues are going to help you get back on target. Again, this is a skill that takes some time to work with and practice. There are some good resources that can help you.

Again, my book, The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative, has some more examples that you can look at. There's a book out called The Big Idea Companion for Preaching and Teaching. I actually contributed the sections on Proverbs and on 1 and 2 Kings, and that goes through those books, and it gives a big idea for every passage.

Again, do your own work first, but then consult those. And I've used that for some of the other books in the Bible, and sometimes I'll think, I don't think that author got it quite right, and I'm sure there are people who would read my section on 1 Kings and say, I'm not so sure that he got the big idea quite right. It's not always easy.

And sometimes, as the old preacher Phillips Brooks said one year in his Yale preaching lectures, preaching is true through personality. And we're always looking for the author's intent, but sometimes we might see something in a unique way that somebody else doesn't. And so we're doing our best to summarize a narrative in a single sentence.

We're doing more than just preaching that big idea. We're going to be retelling the story. We'll talk about what it means to preach these, but it really helps to have that central idea in our minds to know this is what we're aiming to communicate as we tell this story.

We believe this is a summary of the message that God intended to communicate to his people. So those are some resources that might help you with this process. It's an important skill, and it's one that we need to really get a hold of before we move on in the sermon preparation process.

In our next session, I'm going to give you four questions that can help you move now from your exegesis and from identifying that big idea, that exegetical idea, to putting your sermon together. So we've reached the summit. We're at the top of the mountain.

We've got our understanding of the text and a big idea, but now we've got to get back down. And so in our next session, we're going to begin that trek down the mountain to deliver the goods to the people to whom we preach.

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