Dr. Steven D. Mathewson,
Preaching Old Testament Narratives,
Session 6: Four Questions to Move from Exegesis to Sermon Construction

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in a series on preaching Old Testament narratives. This is session number six, four questions to move from exegesis to sermon construction.

In this session, I'd like to talk about four questions that will help you move from your sermon exegesis, your study of the text, to sermon construction, to putting together your sermon.

In his book, Into Thin Air, John Krakauer describes what he felt when he reached the top of Mount Everest, the world's highest point at 29,038 feet. He said this, reaching the top of Everest is supposed to trigger a surge of intense elation against long odds. After all, I had just attained a goal I'd coveted since childhood, but the summit was only the halfway point.

Any impulse I might have felt towards self-congratulation was extinguished by the overwhelming apprehension about the long, dangerous descent that lay ahead. David Breshears is another well-known mountain climber. He's actually the first American to scale Everest twice.

And he agrees with that. And he offers this counsel to climbers. He says, getting to the summit is the easy part.

It's getting back down that's the hard part. And I think that's the way it works with preaching Old Testament narratives. It resembles an Everest expedition.

Once you arrive at the exegetical summit, well, congratulations, that's a, that's a feat, you've discovered the narrative's theological message. But honestly, that's the easy part. It's getting back down to deliver the goods to the congregation, to the church, the people to whom you're preaching.

That's the hard part. So I would suggest that a great place to begin, after you've done your exegetical work and you're ready to come down the mountain to bring what you have learned to share with the people to whom you're preaching, is to analyze the exegetical expression of your big idea by asking and answering four questions. The first question is this: how does this theological message connect to the Bible storyline? Again, every Old Testament narrative we preach belongs to a larger storyline, to what we call a meta-narrative that finds its center in Jesus the Messiah.

N.T. Wright has observed that the Old Testament is a story in search of a conclusion, and as he's observed, the conclusion must incorporate the full liberation and redemption of Israel, and it should correspond and grow out of the rest of the Old Testament story. And of course, that's what the New Testament does. And that I believe is what Christian preachers must do as well.

Now, this brings us into the world of biblical theology, and biblical theology is all about tracing the arc of the Bible storyline by noting the development of major themes, such as covenant or redemption, or temple, that is, the presence of God, the image of God, the city of God, the kingdom of God, and many other themes. I'm not sure it's advisable to reduce the center or the organizing principle of the Old Testament to one particular theme, but I think it's possible to summarize the storyline of the Bible in one sentence, and my suggestion is this: I would say that the Bible is the story of God reestablishing the gift of his presence. You see, the Bible begins and ends in a garden paradise where God dwells with his people.

It moves from a potential building site in Genesis 1 and 2 to a finished city in Revelation 21 and 22. And in between, God dwells with his people in various temples. Actually, Eden was really like the first temple.

It's where God dwelt with his people. Then you had the tabernacle, and then the temple itself that Solomon built. And of course, if you study those, those had imagery and artwork that kind of went back and reflected the conditions in Eden.

So you had the tabernacle, the temple, then you had Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, who described himself as a temple in John 2. And then eventually the church, the church being a temple as well. Now, none of this denies that the story of the scriptures is the story of redemption. I've had people push back and say, well, I've always been taught that the Bible is a story of redemption.

I say, well, absolutely. But we often think about redemption from what? Well, redemption from sin, from bondage. But what are we being redeemed to? And that's back to life in the presence of God.

And the hero of this story, of course, is the one who accomplished this for us, Jesus, the Messiah, the Lamb of God who redeemed us by his blood. Now, exactly how do we establish the connection from the narrative that we've been studying and that we plan to preach? How do we connect that to the larger storyline of the Bible? Well, first, preachers need to remind listeners that they can only respond to the narrative's prophetic message or ethical thrust in the grace that's provided by Jesus Christ and his gospel. Second, listeners need to understand any lines of continuity or discontinuity between the theological message of that Old Testament narrative and the new covenant.

I mean, how can we proclaim from Judges or Chronicles a message, a narrative, without discussing how its theological message is shaped by its fulfillment in Christ? So we need to speak to those issues for sure. Now, there might even be some major biblical themes in the narrative that come to their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Sometimes, too, we can note the way a text prefigures or anticipates Christ.

I don't think we need to do this every time. But honestly, that's more natural in some of the places where we have people like David, who we know from the New Testament, that Jesus is the son of David. So it's a little bit more natural to go from David to Jesus than from some other characters.

So in 1 Samuel 17, as you think about how David anticipates Jesus, I mean, he's the ultimate warrior king who defeats the beast and the kings of the earth who try to oppose the living God, you know, Revelation 19 and following, just as Goliath did. It could also be appropriate to point out that Jesus is the true and better Abigail when preaching 1 Samuel 25, or maybe the true and better Josiah when preaching 1 Kings 22 and 23. Now, I don't do that every time I preach.

I think if we're obsessed with every sermon, finding that Jesus is the true and better character, that may not always be the best approach. We don't want to force the typology and let it eclipse the theological message of the text. But that is something that we want to do.

All right. A second question to use in analyzing the exegetical idea, that is the summary of all of our exegetical study, is to answer the question, "What do my listeners need me to explain? Now, Haddon Robinson, again, one of the deans of expository preaching, wrote the textbook, Biblical Preaching, which is actually in its fourth edition, and tells you how effective it's been over the years. He identifies this question and the next two questions that I'm going to present as functional or developmental questions that the preachers need to ask.

And I find that it's especially helpful to ask them about my listeners. These questions will help us figure out where our listeners are going to say, I don't understand that, and they need an explanation, or maybe they need validation, or maybe they need application. So these deal with our understanding, with belief, and with behavior.

So we begin with this first question. It's really the explanation question. What do my listeners need me to explain? Where are they going to say, I don't understand that? By the way, there's a logical order to these questions.

Robinson talks about the need to explain, to prove, and to apply. When we explain, we're answering the question, well, what does this mean? I don't understand this. Help me understand it.

When we go to the prove or validate question, this is where our listeners say, I'm not sure I buy that. I hear what you're saying, but I'm not sure I can believe that. Is that really true? And then, of course, the application question is, well, how does this relate to my life? You know, what difference does this make? And there's a logical order to those.

You cannot apply what you don't accept, and you can't accept what you don't understand. Now, that doesn't mean that we go through, when we're preaching, that we have to go through them in a strict order. It's just that that's how these questions work.

So the explanation question, as you think about an Old Testament narrative, if we're preaching, let's say the book of Ruth, you might have to explain the meaning of names like Elimelech, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. We talked about those in a previous session. You might need to explain the theological implications of leaving the land of Israel for Moab.

If you make a statement and say, Elimelech, God is my king, turned his back on God, his king, when he left Israel to go to Moab, you might have some listeners who say, " Well, I don't understand that. Why is that wrong? It would be like if I moved from New York City and went to Birmingham, Alabama. What's wrong with that? You might have to explain the plight of a childless widow in Israel. It's not easy for any woman today to be a widow.

I know that. I think of my own mom, who was a widow for the last 20 years of her life. But, wow, in Israel, legally, it was a much different situation.

You might have to explain the kinsman-redeemer concept, maybe the custom of allowing the poor to glean at the edge of the field. By the way, it doesn't mean that you have to take five minutes on all of these, or your sermon will already be over. Maybe some of them you can answer in a sentence or two.

Others might need a little bit more time. Maybe your listeners are going to wonder, well, what about that expression, loyal love? Or if you talk about the steadfast love, loving kindness, however it's translated in the translation you preach from, you might have to explain that. Maybe the significance of Ruth uncovering Boaz's feet.

And there are a lot of questions about that. And then, why did Boaz sit down at the town gate? And what in the world were the elders doing there? What about the sandal-removing ceremony? By the way, even the writer explains that one for us, because apparently, even the first readers weren't as familiar with it. So we always have to think as we're looking at these narratives, what do we need to explain? And again, we can't explain everything.

And if you have a longer list, like the one I just gave you, you're going to have to do some explaining quickly. But that's really helpful to keep us from over-explaining on one hand, but also under-explaining and just assuming that the people know as much about the culture in which these stories happen, because oftentimes that's not the case. All right, the third question to use in analyzing the exegetical idea is the validation question, the prove-it question.

And the question is, where do my listeners say, I don't agree with that? Again, the focus here is on validity. Haddon Robinson used to call this the C.S. Lewis question, because he was so good with this. These days, I tend to call it the Tim Keller question, because the late Tim Keller was so good at anticipating and then responding to people's objections.

So we need to do that as we preach these passages. Anyone who takes the Bible seriously can struggle with its truth claims, and so we need to be sure that we're anticipating these questions. I thought about this recently when I preached the book of Esther.

And yes, I actually preached it in an entire sermon. That can be a challenge, but the benefit is that it's an entire narrative. And you don't get resolution until you get towards the end.

So my big idea for the book of Esther was, and I know others have had a similar idea, but my idea was that even when you can't see and hear God, He still is in control of your destiny. Now, you might have a listener who hears that and says, "Is that really true? I'm not sure I can buy that. But actually, the answers to that objection come right out of the text.

You don't have to make things up from elsewhere. It's right there in the text. You can show from the story of Esther how God overcomes the poor spiritual climate around Esther and the people.

You can show how He overcomes impossible people in high places, how He overcomes the unpredictable events in life. I mean, even the casting of lots determined when the sentence was going to be carried out against the Jewish people. And it gave them time to prepare and defend themselves.

You can show how God overcomes times when the circumstances just don't change. And He does it in ways that you won't recognize if you don't look closely. That's what's going on in the book of Esther.

All right, the final question to use in analyzing the exegetical idea is the application question. And the question is, how does God want me to respond to this theological

message? This question takes its cue from 2 Timothy 3, 16 and 17, which says that all scripture is God-breathed and it's profitable for doctrine, for rebuke, for correcting, for training in righteousness, that the man or woman of God might be thoroughly equipped for every good work. The challenge, though, as my mentor Haddon Robinson used to quip, is that more heresy is preached in application than it is in Bible exegesis.

And the first time I heard that, I kind of laughed at it and thought, yeah, he's probably overstating that. But the more I preach and the more I listen to others preach, I think that's true. So one of the pitfalls that we face in applying Old Testament narrative literature to our listeners' lives is moralizing.

And moralizing is simply reducing application to moral lessons from the characters' lives, especially lessons that are kind of peripheral to the theological message or the ethical thrust of the narrative. That's what we really have to watch for. Now, I don't want to overstate the problem because I think some people go the other way.

They are so worried about moralizing that they're almost too afraid to say, "This is what this narrative is calling God's people to do. And we don't have to be concerned about or afraid of that. I mean, remember, the Apostle Paul recognized the validity of looking at Old Testament narratives for examples of how or how not to live.

First Corinthians 10, verses 6 and 11. And again, the fact that the Greek words there are tupoi and tupikos that give us the word type, when you read them in the context, it's clear that Paul is talking about examples. Daniel Doriani, who has thought a lot about application, says this: if some rush to draw ethical points from scripture, others so fear moralism that they resist the idea of using narratives for moral lessons.

But Jesus himself justifies the search for ethical principles from biblical narratives. I think what we have to be careful of is a couple of things. One is an application that rests on a faulty or careless reading of a narrative.

And that's why we've spent so much time talking about how to study a narrative. So, for example, some preachers have used Gideon's placement of a fleece on the threshing floor. That's back in Judges 6, 36 to 40.

They've used that narrative as an example of how to discover God's will by seeking a sign. That misses the point, though, because if it's going to work, I always tell people, if you want that to work, first of all, you have to know what God's will is. I mean, Gideon already knew what God's will was.

He simply lacked the faith to do it. And he sought reassurance. Mary Evans, a fine scholar, says Gideon's need for God's repeated action shows that signs, per se, are rarely really convincing.

So there's a case where sometimes handling a narrative in a careless way, making it do something that it doesn't do, failing to recognize that Gideon already knew God's will, and then if you try to turn that into a paradigm for finding God's will, you run into problems. A second problem is having an application or basing an application on details that are peripheral to the theological message that's being communicated by the author. Now, these details may be critical to the narrative, but they're really not the ethical thrust of the narrative.

For example, I've heard sermons on 2 Samuel 11 and 12 that focus on King David's failure to go out to war with his army in the spring, and if he had done so, he would not have put himself in circumstances where he faced sexual temptation, and that's true, but the narrator never really tells us whether or not David was right or wrong in staying back at the palace. Maybe he had a good reason. I suspect maybe not, but I don't know that for sure.

Yes, it's true that times of idleness can make us more vulnerable to temptation, but that's really not where the writer is going in that narrative, so I think we have to be really cautious about building a big application around that. Yeah, I've heard preachers draw application, too, from Nathan's parable and urging listeners to create a parable whenever they need to confront someone with their sin, and I'm not saying that that's a bad practice. Maybe there's, I think there's probably some wisdom in that.

I'm just not sure that that's really where the narrative is going, and if we say, if those are your two primary applications out of that narrative, you're going to miss the point. So how then do we apply Old Testament narratives to the lives of New Covenant believers? Let me suggest another four questions for you, and maybe you're saying, I'm so tired of all these questions. I just want to preach the Bible.

Well, guess what? There has to be a lot of thinking that goes into this, and eventually, maybe you'll just learn to ask these questions intuitively, but I think these are the things that we have to wrestle with. One question is, should I base the application on what the characters do and say? Again, that's tricky because sometimes the positive or negative actions of a character line up with a theological message of the narrative, but sometimes that's not the case. I think Judges 3, 12 to 30, is a prime example.

When I preach this message, this is the Ehud story. Remember Ehud and King Eglon? My theological idea, my big idea, is that God delivers his people from hopeless situations in unexpected ways. Now, a lot of times when preachers preach that, they

call their listeners to use their unique characteristics or their weaknesses to serve God, just like Ehud used his left-handedness.

And yet, in the climax of the narrative, Yehud makes a statement that gives us a clue to the author's intended message. Remember, again, the importance of talking in these narratives? Yehud says, Follow me, for the Lord has given Moab your enemy into your hands. See, this is a story about how God delivers his people from situations that appear hopeless.

And I would argue that Ehud's left-handedness is only one of the unexpected ways that God used to bring about deliverance. I mean, there's surprise in every point in the story. A left-handed warrior from a right-handed tribe? I mean, the name Benjamin means a son of the right hand, and yet Ehud, this Benjamite, was left-handed.

There's a secret message, there's an escape made possible by the delay that was caused by the smell of a king who was presumably going to the bathroom. Yes, that's in the narrative. So I would argue that it's better to challenge listeners not to give up in hopeless situations, rather than to use their unique characteristics to serve God.

So that's an example of what I mean by that. Secondly, I think we always have to ask, "What is the ethical thrust of the narrative? To put it another way, what admonition or exhortation does the story offer? We've already talked about that. Remember, the big idea states the theological message of the narrative, and that message implies an exhortation or an ethical thrust, but it doesn't always restate it.

It's like this: we always have to ask ourselves what a narrator is doing with what they are saying, and that's based on a helpful distinction in linguistics between semantics and pragmatics. Again, you're not going to use those words when you preach, but semantics refers to what something means, and pragmatics refers to how that saying functions in its context. So, for example, here's a statement: a car is coming.

All right, what does that mean? Well, in terms of semantics, it means that a four-wheeled vehicle is approaching. However, in terms of pragmatics, that statement can function either as a warning or an encouragement. If my grandkids are playing football out on the front yard, and sometimes need to enter the street to retrieve the football after a missed pass, which is quite often with my grandsons, I will utter that statement as a warning.

I'll say, a car is coming, and they stop because they know it's not safe to go out in the street. But if they're waiting impatiently for their dad to return with pizza that they ordered, that same statement can be an encouragement. And if they're saying, oh, when's my dad going to get there? I could say, a car is coming.

Well, then I'm not warning them to stay out of the street. I'm trying to offer them some encouragement. Hey, maybe this is your dad.

In the same way, preachers have to determine how the theological message of the narrative is going to land. How's it going to function? Is it an encouragement? Is it a warning? Is it a call to action? As previously noted, I said the theological idea of Judges 3:12 to 30, is that God delivers his people from hopeless situations in unexpected ways. I would argue that it functions as a challenge to trust God, or maybe even an encouragement to people who are ready to give up.

All right. I think we also have to ask, how does the message of the narrative relate to a new covenant believer? As William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard suggest, we can assume neither that all of the Old Testament carries over into the New Testament without any change in application, nor that none of it carries over unchanged. Rather, we must examine each text to discover how it has been fulfilled in Christ, and by fulfilled, in Matthew 5:17, which refers to being brought to complete expression, and of course, this loops us back into our discussion of biblical theology, doesn't it? The storyline, the context of the entire Bible, will help us determine what continues and what discontinues as we move from the Old Covenant, which is what Old Testament narratives reflect, to the New Covenant.

So, for example, in Judges 17 and 18, the problem of idols, how do we preach that? Well, we know that that problem's not unique to the Old Testament. I mean, the Apostle John ends his first epistle by warning its recipients to keep themselves from idols, which almost comes out of nowhere at the end of 1 John. My little children, keep yourselves from idols, because that was a big deal.

In Colossians chapter 3, the Apostle Paul equates greed with idolatry. So, idols were still a problem in the New Testament, and that helps us as we think about how to preach that text. Other things might not carry over.

All right, finally, what implication does the theological message have for the concrete situations that my listeners face? And this is a big challenge. I am so convinced that a vague application leads to vague Christian living. And if we simply tell our listeners, you need to apply this in your workplace, well, that's great, but what does that look like? I'm convinced that we have to show them that.

We have to be concrete. That might mean giving two or three really brief examples of what it looks like to live this out in our particular zip codes, in our particular time when we live. That's very important.

We have to think about our people. Matthew Kim had written a book called Preaching with Cultural Intelligence, and it's worth reading. He reminds us that loving

the people to whom we preach requires us to know them simply beyond their names and their professions.

Who are they? What cultures and subcultures are they identifying with? What are their dreams? What are they afraid of? What do they hold most closely? What causes them pain? This is also a good place to turn your exegetical idea into a preaching idea. So you've thought through these questions, and you're just about ready now to start actually putting your sermon together, finally, but you need to think about how to turn your exegetical idea into a preaching idea. Remember, people often act on ideas. Not only often, that's what they do, but ideas only stick when communicators package them properly.

A few years ago, United Parcel Service, UPS, made this claim that we run the tightest ship in the shipping business. And that claim worked because it was clear, it was concise, it was concrete, wasn't it? And it was creative. Consists only of nine words.

Language is vivid, plays off the word shipping. And as a result, the idea is memorable and compelling. So we need to do the same thing in order to make our ideas stick.

That doesn't mean that we have to be the most clever preacher on the planet. I assure you that I'm not, but I have to work hard at it, and it's worth it. We have to be creative in some ways, like Proverbs.

So, for example, here's an idea. What do you think of this idea? The idea is this, one value of a relationship is a way that two parties bring about personal growth in each other. Well, that idea is true, but probably forgettable, isn't it? It's fairly clear, but not really compelling.

However, if you state it like this, it's going to stick. As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. And that statement, of course, is Proverbs 27.

You know, as preachers, we work with words, so it's worth some time and effort to state our theological idea in a more memorable, compelling way. I'd suggest that if you can say it in nine to 15 words, that's going to be helpful. Maybe you can't always do it that way, but that's just a good approach.

Now I will say this: I would argue that clear is better than clever. And while it's good to be creative, it's usually not good to be clever. It can make grand theological ideas sound cheap, trite, or silly.

I mean, we're not creating some kind of an ad slogan to sell toothpaste. We're communicating the life-changing truth of the word of God. So we want to be very careful about this.

When I preach First Samuel, my big idea is often that God wins victories through leaders who trust in his power to save, and that's probably sufficient. Another possibility is that when God gets big business, faith always gets the contract. I like that.

I think that's creative, but I'm not sure that it crosses that line in being so clever that it becomes trite. So we've got to be careful. When I preach Judges 17 and 18, I might simply use a statement like this: the idolatry of God's people will cause them to miss out on the presence of God.

But that doesn't sound as personal or as conversational as I'd like. So I played with that a little bit. And the idea struck me with a lot more force when I changed the first part to say, when we pursue idolatry, we miss out on God's presence.

Do you hear the difference? The idolatry of God's people will cause them to miss out on the presence of God. But even saying, when we pursue idolatry, we miss out on God's presence. It's actually a few fewer words.

But I can even do this, kind of riffing off the phrase in 1 Thessalonians 1.9 about how the Thessalonian believers turn from God, or when, how they turn from idols to God, I just flipped that around, and I said, when we turn from God to idols, we miss out on God's presence. And so that can be another way of stating it. Of course, listeners who are not as familiar with the Bible will not pick up on that, but the wording might catch the attention of some listeners who know the scriptures.

All right. It's also helpful to think about the sermon's purpose at this point. What is it that you want to accomplish? What do you hope to see God's spirit do in the lives of your people? All right.

Finally, finally, we are ready to proceed. We've done a lot of high-level thinking, but when you do this kind of thinking, and you do it prayerfully, you're going to be able to put together a message that God's spirit can use to make a real, significant difference in the lives of your listeners. All right.

Finally, it's time to determine the shape that our sermon will take. Time to outline it. We will work on that in our next session.

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