

**Dr. Steven D. Mathewson,
Preaching Old Testament Narratives.
Session 7: Shaping and Outlining the Sermon.**

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in his preaching on Old Testament narratives. This is session number seven: Shaping and Outlining the Sermon.

In this session, we're going to talk about shaping and outlining the sermon that you are preparing from an Old Testament narrative text.

For years, aspiring preachers have received this sage advice. Tell them what you plan to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you just told them. Now that turns out to be lousy advice when preaching a story.

To preach an Old Testament narrative effectively, preachers must wrestle with the most important or the most effective way of shaping the sermon. And that brings us to the next stage in the sermon development process. So at this point, the preacher must ask, "What kind of form will I use to accomplish the purpose that I determined based on the big idea? What shape is my sermon going to take? Many pastors opt for shaping their sermons around a list of principles that they have learned during their study.

A few years ago, I perused a year's worth of issues from a popular publication on preaching, and most of the published manuscripts on Old Testament narrative texts followed this tactic. One pastor shaped a sermon from Exodus 3:1 to 12 around three keys to impossible living gleaned from Moses' life. Another pastor preached Genesis 45:1 to 13 by listing the techniques that Joseph used to put his painful past behind him.

Still another preacher handled the story of Abraham's test in Genesis 22 by sharing four principles about the testing of our faith. Yet another preached Genesis 39 and the account of Joseph overcoming temptation by highlighting four reasons why we should say no to sexual temptation. But this approach does not really reflect the strategy or the style of the authors who compose these Old Testament narratives.

Often, it doesn't do justice to the prophetic message of the narrative. Instead, it simply uses the narrative to illustrate principles that a preacher supposedly finds in the text. Often, I think those principles come from other places, maybe the New Testament, and they get read back into this particular narrative.

The key is to plot your sermon by taking your cue from the way that the story unfolds. While you need to do more than tell the story, you cannot do less. And I can't emphasize that enough.

When you're preaching a narrative, it ought to sound like a narrative. It ought to sound like a story. Yes, you have to do more than that, but you can't do less than that.

And ideally, you'll follow the same set of tracks that the biblical storyteller did. So what implication does this have for the development of your sermon's idea? There are two major ways to present ideas. And those approaches are called induction and deduction.

And I wouldn't be surprised that you've heard of inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning. Let's start with deduction. In deduction, you start with the conclusion or the whole, and then you work to the specific details.

In other words, you give the answer up front, and then you break it down, and you explain it. Now, arranging a sermon deductively can make it very clear. It also runs the risk of being boring.

If you've given away your big idea, well, why should anybody listen? Well, sometimes the writer will do that in certain parts of Scripture. I think especially of New Testament epistles, which are not always deductive, but sometimes you'll get an idea up front, and then the writer will explain that or maybe prove it or apply it. And in doing so, it kind of raises tension.

You've already got the idea out on the table, so where's the tension? Well, you have to find that in the text. Maybe the tension is there because, like, this just doesn't make any sense. Or maybe the tension is there because a reader says, I don't know that I can believe this.

I mean, if you're preaching 2 Corinthians 12, what, about 7 through 10, and Paul talks about how his weakness was good, and you're saying, no, no, no, that's, I don't see how that's the case. Well, you've got their attention. On the other side, induction or inductive arrangement starts with the specific pieces, and then, at the end, you get the conclusion.

The answer is unknown at the beginning. You don't get the answer until the end. Now, when done poorly, induction can be unclear.

Sometimes people will say, I had no idea where the preacher was going. And that can be good or bad if they say, I had no idea where that preacher was going, that's bad.

Or it could be, I had no idea where the preacher was going, but it was really intriguing.

So you have to be careful with induction. Your listeners might struggle to stay on track since they're not sure where you're going, but when done well, induction really gives the preacher an edge. Arranging a sermon inductively creates suspense and produces a sense of discovery.

So how should you preach Old Testament narratives? Should you do them deductively or should you do them inductively? Well, the answer to that is the answer to the question, how do stories work? Well, stories work inductively, don't they? It's fairly rare that you get an answer up front. Usually, you get all the details and the answer; the story doesn't. Remember, it doesn't resolve itself. There's no resolution until the end of the story.

I mean, that's how good stories work. There's that aha moment at the end. And so I would argue that when we preach them, we ought to save the big idea for the end, that we should maintain the story sense of what I would call strategic delay.

In other words, the big idea is not front-loaded. The idea is saved for the end. I have to confess that early in my preaching of Old Testament narratives, I always told the congregation up front what I planned to tell them.

I was so concerned that they might miss my big idea that I distrusted the story form and gave away the idea at the beginning. So I would say something like, this morning we're going to see in 1 Samuel 5-7 that God is not just a power source you can exploit, but a powerful person you must worship. And in essence, I was saying, before I tell you the story this morning, let me skip to the last chapter and give away the ending.

But if you do that, that just leads to a less satisfying, less exciting journey. Now, strategic delay is not difficult to build into your sermon, because that's usually what narratives do. That, for example, in Judges 17 and 18, the narrator informs us early on that Micah had a house of God.

That's the way the Hebrew text puts it, a house of God, or a house of God's. However, the narrator withheld a very key clarifying detail until the end of the story, the very last line, chapter 18, verse 31. Remember, both chapters, it takes two chapters to tell the whole story.

And the very last line is, all the time, the house of God, same Hebrew expression except the word the is on the front of it, or the article the is on the front of it. All the time, the house of God was in Shiloh. And so wise preachers are simply going to reserve comment on that detail until the end of the narrative.

Now, sometimes it may be effective to wait until the end of the narrative to emphasize a key detail that appears earlier in the story. It doesn't mean that you skip it. But what it means is you don't talk a lot about it.

You don't emphasize it until later. Let me give you an example. In a sermon on 2 Samuel 11 and 12, you might delay your comments on Uriah's noble words in chapter 11, verse 11, until later in the narrative.

I mean, remember that Uriah is really a foil to David, and Uriah is demonstrating the kind of character that David didn't have. This is what he says in 2 Samuel 11, verse 11. When David, remember, was trying to get Uriah to go home and to sleep with his wife Bathsheba to cover the fact that David had impregnated her and that she was bearing a child.

So this is what Uriah said to David when David found out he didn't go home. And he said, how haven't you just come from a military campaign? Why didn't you go home? And here's Uriah's response. The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my Lord's men are camped in the open country.

How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing. Now, it's not that I skipped that when I'm going through the story, but I don't stop and linger on that because at the very end of the narrative, I want to contrast that with David's actions. And I want to point out that Uriah had the kind of character that God wanted David to have, that David should have had as King of Israel, as one who feared the living God.

When you follow the contours of a storyline, that means placing the big idea at the end, and it means riding the tension that's created by the crisis or the complication of the story. So remember, tension is your friend. And when the tension's over, the sermon's over, whether you're done preaching it or not.

So that's why we use an inductive form when we preach narratives, unless you come across an exception, and there are really not many of them. In Joshua 7, the Achan story, we're told right up front that Achan was the one who sinned, but the tension is raised because as you go through the story, you're wondering, is he going to be discovered, or how is he going to be discovered? So again, preaching these inductively makes sense. Now, you know how you're going to present the sermon.

It's time to prepare an outline so that you have a map for where you're headed. So I want to talk about outlines. Years ago, I was in a preaching class taught by Haddon Robinson, and my friend Dean was one of the first to share his sermon outline.

We all had to do this, and then Dr. Robinson would critique our work. So my friend was assigned to preach 1 Samuel 17, the David and Goliath story, and here were his main points. By the way, I called him Rod in my book.

I shared this story in my book, and my friend Dean said, no, you didn't have to change my name. I don't care if people know, so I'm using his real name. So Dean's outline was this.

Point one, Goliath challenges God's people. Point two was that Saul cowers with God's people. Point three, David conquers for God's people.

Well, it's alliterated, right? Challenges, cowers, conquers, and it's parallel. You've got God's people in every one of those. Haddon Robinson for a moment, was silent, and then he growled, that sounds like it came out of a book called Simple Sermons for Sunday Evening, and of course, all of us erupted in laughter, but it was nervous laughter and sympathetic laughter because we knew we were going next, and Haddon followed that up by saying, nobody talks like this anymore except in the pulpit.

Dwayne Litvin was a guest professor who was there with Haddon that day, and he chimed in and said, "What Haddon's saying is that he's afraid you might go out and actually preach that sermon. Well, the outline stage in sermon preparation is, for some of us, one of the most intimidating steps in the process. Brian Chappell talks about that in his Christ-centered preaching.

He said, in a classroom and seminars around the country, I find that preachers have more questions about structure than any other aspect of preaching. So, what I'd like to do is to give you some tips for effective outlines, especially outlines in Old Testament narrative sermons. All right, here's the first tip.

Do not try to create outlines that people will remember. And you might be saying, what? That's what I've been taught to do. I'll say it again.

Do not create outlines, or do not try to create outlines that people will remember. And honestly, it took me years to figure this out. I remember the contractor who framed my house, and I helped him do that.

I remember one day we were working on framing a wall, and if you know anything about building, you're taking like two-by-fours and studs, and you've got a top plate, and you've got a bottom plate, and then you've got the studs, and it's laid down on the ground, and you're hammering the nail in. And the contractor, my friend John, walked by, and he goes, "Hey, you're not building a piano. I said, what? He says, "You're not building a piano.

I said, John, I have no idea what you're talking about. He said, "You're trying to get the studs to line up with like a one-sixteenth of an inch. He said, "It doesn't have to be that precise.

He says, it's going to be covered with sheetrock. You can't be sloppy, but this is not finished work. This is not highly precise.

And I think that's true with outlines. You know, we need a sturdy frame, but there's going to be sheetrock over your sermon outline, or to use another analogy, one that I used in a previous session, people won't need to see my skeleton. I absolutely need it to support myself to be here, but you don't have to see it.

And I would argue that's the way it is with outline points, especially in Old Testament narrative sermons. I think there are other kinds of literature where, sometimes, maybe you do want your listeners to pick up a little bit more on an outline point, especially if you have a list, but not a narrative. So why do we even need them? Well, we need them for structure.

We need them because they, these outline points and sub points, give us a roadmap. They walk us through the key ideas that we need to communicate when we preach a story. Here's a second tip: View main points as endings, not as beginnings.

Here's the problem. While stories work inductively, outlines work deductively. Have you ever had that impulse? Maybe you're coming out of your sermon introduction, it's time for point one, but you want to go straight to sub point A, and then sub point B, and then sub point C, and then at the end, point one will emerge.

Well, that's often what happens in a narrative. So, the outline point is the idea that you want to emerge at the end of a section. Usually, if you have point one, that's going to cover a section of biblical text in this narrative.

And more than likely, the idea in that text isn't going to emerge and become clear until you get to the end of it. So it's fine to work through your subpoints first to get to your main point, and, by the way, you may not state your main point verbatim. You don't have to do that.

We're not trying to create outlines that people remember. But that main point, if that's a key point in the story, that's what you're working up to. So what I do sometimes is I'll have like my main point, point number one.

And at the end of it, I'll write develop inductively. And that just tells me that when I come to this point, it's actually a movement of thought. We'll talk about that in just a moment.

And the idea that I want to communicate is probably going to emerge at the end. All right, here's a third tip. State your outline points in full sentences.

I know that can be, that can seem like busy work that might seem annoying, but if your outline point is the problem of idolatry, well, that doesn't tell you anything, it doesn't tell me anything except for the topic, remember this outline is really for you now you might have in your head what the problem of idolatry is, but your main point ought to state that, he, you know, this is, this is trying to help us, think ourselves clear. And if we don't put things in complete sentences, what we're going to do is end up with these caption surveys, and it's going to tell you the topic. What are you saying about that topic? Partial statements allow thought to slip through our minds, kind of like a football.

That's slick. It's, you know, it's covered with moisture because of the rain. So, when writing this outline, remember it as a way of thinking, and you'll short-circuit the process.

If you do not write out your points in complete sentences, and think in terms of moves instead of points, movements, you're working your way through a story. Maybe I should even say, think in terms of scenes instead of points. But a movement is a section in your sermon in which a particular element of the narrative, maybe a scene or a conversation or an idea, a theological idea, forms in the minds of your listeners.

So when you get up to preach, that's why you don't say my first point is, or point number one, you're telling a story, and when you see point number one in your outline, that should say to you, okay, here's the first movement in my sermon. Here's the first scene I'm going to describe, or this outline point covers this conversation between Samuel and Saul, in first Samuel 15. And when I see that point, it's not that, not that I'm going to take that and say to my listeners, here's point number one, or my first point is, no, that just tells you, this is what I'm aiming at, I work through this part of the story.

This is the idea that needs to emerge. Fifth, I would encourage you to aim for two to four main points because your points are well-made. Your main points are reflecting major movements in your sermon, and you can only do so much in 30 minutes or so.

Honestly, a lot of Old Testament narrative sermons I preach have two points, and as you might suppose, the two points reflect the crisis. And the resolution, the crisis often being the problem, then the resolution being the solution or the outcome, whether it's positive or negative. Now you can have more main points, of course, but I'd suggest never exceeding four. If you have more than four main points, though, don't despair.

Doesn't mean that you have to get rid of them. Just means you move them down a level and you say, okay, these two or three points really tie into a bigger idea. Besides, if you have more than two to four main points, what it probably tells me, and it should tell you, is that your sermon structure is too complex.

And if it's too complex, your listeners aren't going to be able to follow it. Again, you don't have to reduce the number. You don't have to get rid of points, but, you know, combine them.

But again, I would encourage you to start with, start with crisis and resolution, build your sermon structure and your sermon outline around that. And if you need an extra point at the beginning for the exposition, that's fine, or maybe, maybe there is a conclusion that demands another point. That's all right as well.

You can make that determination. But keep your outline as simple as possible. Complex outlines mean that your sermon is going to be unclear, and you're going to get muddled up in the story you're trying to tell.

All right, here's a final tip. Include your big idea in the outline. I prefer to state it as one of my main points.

It usually gives me the last point. Although some preachers and teachers may prefer to put it in the conclusion, that's okay.

But since the big idea is a prominent part of the sermon, I usually include it in my outline again. It's going to appear in the last point, because it comes at the end. Now that big idea can, can be for the final set of verses in the narrative, or you can have it as a separate point after you've, after you've walked through the text.

You know, I don't lose any sleep over which way to go again. Make your outline as simple as possible. So let me give you an example before we're finished here in Judges 17 and 18. I have two points in that sermon that say, "Wow, two whole chapters.

Yes. And I have two main points. And by the way, they don't follow the chapter divisions.

My first main point runs all the way from 17:1 to 18:17. And the main point is this: Micah and the Danites turned from God to idols. Now, when I preach that I don't say, so my first point is Micah and the Danites turned from God to idols.

I just saw that. And I realized that's, that's the, that's the crisis in the story. And that's what I need to communicate to people.

Maybe I will use some sort of summarizing statement. When I get to the end of verse 17 of chapter 18, I might say, how tragic is this, that both Micah and the Danites have turned from God to idols. You see how I worked it in? I didn't say, so my first point is this.

I tell that as part of the story, by the way, all my sub points. And I simply had three of them, which are just summaries of what happens in the text. And it might seem like, well, I don't even need those.

I can see the texts as I look at it. But those three points, subpoints, tell me these are key concepts that I have to make sure I'm talking about. Remember, we talked about the things that need to be explained.

These are basically things that I need to explain. So, I'll just, for the sake of walking through this, my first sub point, 17:1 to 13, is that Micah makes an idol and builds an unauthorized religious system. I mean, that's what's going on in that section.

Point B, the Danite sees the distant city of Laish instead of taking over the inheritance assigned to them. And I really need to make that point. And when I talk about the Danites, that the spy mission that they set out on was unauthorized and that they took land for their tribe.

That was not given to them. They abandoned the land that God had given them. They couldn't conquer the people who were there, the enemies who were there.

And so they left. The third sub point, letter C, the Danites take Micah's idol and priest on their way to capturing Laish. Again, it's not rocket science, is it? I'm just, I'm just summarizing key movements in the story.

And that kind of helps me to think through how I tell that story. But again, my first main, my first point, point number one, Micah and the Danites turned from God to idols. That is the crisis.

My second main point, and this covers the rest of chapter 18 from verses 18 to 31. As a result, Micah and the Danites did not experience the presence of God. Now I could simply put my big idea there, but I'm going to put it towards the end because I want to say it in a, in a little bit more compelling way.

But that's where I'm going. That's the resolution of the story. It's a, it's a sad ending, isn't it? It's a tragedy.

This story is a tragedy. So again, the main point, as a result, Micah and the Danites did not experience the presence of God. That's the point that I'm going to be making.

That's what this section of the narrative says. And I'm going to use a little bit different words. I, again, I'm not going to say my point now, my second point is, you know, point one was this, now point two, that's not what storytellers do.

So again, I will have some subpoints that just walk through the details. And then my final sub point is my big idea. When we turn from God to idols, we miss out on the presence of God.

I could have put that as point two, but in the main points in this story, I was kind of using the language, I'm just telling the story, and then my big idea I put as the final sub point. I probably could have put it in the first sub-point under the conclusion. It doesn't matter.

The key is it's at the end of the story, right? So that's kind of how you work with outlines. They can be tricky. They can be frustrating, but keep them simple.

And once you have the outline in place, it's time to flesh it out. We're going to build a sermon on the outline we've created, and we will do that in our next session.

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