

## **Dr. David Mathewson, Preaching Old Testament Narratives, Session 9: Sermon Delivery**

This is Dr. Stephen D. Mathewson in a series on Preaching Old Testament Narratives. This is session number nine: Sermon Delivery.

In this session, we're going to work on sermon delivery. It's finally time to deliver the goods. You've polished your manuscript. You've pored over it.

You've prayed over it. You've invested hours to get to this point. And now you are ready to preach the story of the Old Testament narrative texts that you've chosen.

You're ready to preach it with conviction and style. One of the first things that we need to talk about is what to forget, what to leave behind. Well, to get off to a good start, when you go to preach your sermon, I would encourage you to forget your manuscript, to leave it behind, and maybe even leave your notes behind.

Or if you use notes to use just a very small, abbreviated outline, the payoffs for preaching without notes are enormous, and I realize that not everybody wants to do that. And it's fine if you have some notes, but here's the thing. When we preach, as Had Robinson used to say, a good sermon remembers itself.

And what I've discovered is that I don't forget the details. I just have to remember the big major movements. Think about a story that you might tell.

If somebody said to you or you're talking to somebody, and you want to tell them about an event that happened 10 years ago, you probably don't have to pull out notes. If it's something memorable in your life, maybe you had a son or daughter that was born, or maybe you had a harrowing escape while you were out hiking or while you were driving, whatever the case might be, I guarantee you, you will remember the details. And if you have immersed yourself in the study of a text, you're going to remember the details more than you realize.

It's just the big things that you have to remember. And even the structure of the narrative, just remembering the major movements. And if you want to talk about a particular character, or if you do have a quote or an illustration, yeah, those are the kinds of things that you may need to see in an outline.

But I'm afraid that notes become a security blanket, and they really keep us from preaching eyeball to eyeball. Now, how in the world do you preach with few notes or with little, with no notes at all? Maybe you fear that what happened to George

Truitt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, will happen to you? He said that he tried preaching without notes. And after expounding for seven minutes on you are the light of the world, he said, my little light went out, but he recovered from the trauma, and I guess he finished the sermon.

So how do you preach without any notes or with a few notes? Well, my profound answer to that is just do it. There are no surefire formulas or steps, but there are some things that you can do. Number one, first, make sure to organize your sermon well.

Again, a good sermon remembers itself. And that's why I've encouraged you in the previous session to write out a word-for-word manuscript, at least when you began preaching these narratives and even at a few points throughout your preaching ministry, go back and do that because writing is a way of thinking. Secondly, internalize your material.

I never encourage anybody to try to memorize a sermon manuscript. If you're able to do that, well, that's great. But I know I never could do it.

And I'm not sure that even if I could, that it would be helpful because the words wouldn't come out naturally or conversationally. And that's part of storytelling. You want to be conversational.

So go over and over and over and over it again. By the way, that's the word, the meaning of the word meditate, which occurs in both Joshua 1.8 and Psalm 1.2 is like you're reading something over and over and over and over again. Third, pray through your manuscript.

Turn the major moves of your sermon into prayer requests and ask God to help you communicate each section clearly, and if necessary, to help you say something differently than you're saying it. If it just doesn't seem to fit together again, there's no substitute for prayer, and all the study in the world can't make up for a lack of prayer. So pray at every point in the process and pray your way through your sermon manuscript.

Finally, rehearse your delivery. Take your manuscript with you into an empty worship center where you will preach, or even if you practice this in a room in your house, in your bedroom, start by reading a section through, then maybe set aside that manuscript and either without notes or just with your brief outline, work on delivering the section without it. And if you slip up, you can always refer to that manuscript and find out what you missed.

And the closer you get to sermon delivery day, which for many of you will be on a Sunday, run through the whole sermon without notes. Now, what you might notice is

if you stumble through a certain section, then you may need to work on a transition or revise a section that does not flow. This is also a good place to say something about transitions.

They are worth their weight in gold, and we have to help our listeners make a shift from this idea to that idea or from this part of a narrative to that part of a narrative. And the challenge for us is that we are so familiar with it after hours of study that we forget we're preaching to people who don't know the text as well as we did just because of all the time we've spent. So we have to help guide them, and transitions are important.

If you do decide to preach without notes, I would encourage you to always write the big idea of your passage at the top of the page in your Bible where you're going to be preaching. You can even write one-word notes in the margins as triggers, and I will do that. Sometimes I've even written out my outline, you know, in my Bible so I can again, I can see where I'm headed.

If I'm going to talk about a word, I might underline or circle it. If I'm going to use an illustration, I'll just use a one-word trigger. Now this is where you have to be careful because the temptation is to take your Bible and in the margin to try to reproduce your sermon manuscript and pack it tighter than a German sausage.

And if you do that, it's going to be more confusing. So again, that works whether you're preaching from the Bible and book form or if you're using the text on your iPad or your tablet, you can do the same thing. So again, you don't have to preach without notes, but I would say either go without notes or have minimal notes, and that just gives you more freedom.

Again, you will be surprised how much you retain and how much you remember if you do that. One other issue we haven't talked about yet would be first-person narrative sermons. And that's where you preach the text as one of the characters in the narrative that can be effective.

Some people might think that that's a little bit artificial, but what I found when I've done that is that I really enter storytelling mode. By the way, even if you never preach a first-person sermon, maybe you're preaching the book of Ruth, and I've done it before as one of the elders in the city of Bethlehem. But even if you don't do that, if you practice it that way, there's something about that that just puts you into storytelling mode.

And then you can use that when you come back, and you just preach in the third person as we normally do. If you're interested in preaching first-person narratives, I'd recommend a book called *It's All in How You Tell It* by Tori Robinson and Haddon

Robinson. Tori would be Haddon's son, and they would talk about how to preach a first-person narrative and give you some ideas.

In fact, they used my sermon manuscript, I believe, on the book of Ruth in that volume. And so, yes, I've done some of these, but I do them sparingly. By the way, if you do that, one of the questions is, should you wear some kind of a costume? And I'm not sure, you know, theologically, I guess, hey, you had both Jeremiah and Ezekiel who use costumes and props.

So I guess there's no theological reason to avoid them. But I think the practical question is, will the use of a costume or prop work for me or against me in communicating this sermon? And I tend to avoid them. Well, that's an understatement.

I've never used a costume when I preached a first-person narrative. And I think some of it is, or a big part of it, that that may communicate that I'm acting rather than preaching. And I still want to adopt the stance of a preacher.

Now, I know others who have done first-person narratives, and they've used costumes, and others have reported that it's effective. So that's just something you'll have to decide. I think, as far as props go, probably less is more.

But you know what? Sometimes, when you're preaching, having a prop could be useful. When I've preached Exodus or Judges chapter three, verses 12 through 30, the Ehud story, and talked about it like a dagger versus a sword. Sometimes I've brought in examples of that.

I've used a sword. I remember preaching Exodus 17 and talking about the battle standard. You know, the Lord is my banner.

And so I made one. I took a stick, put a flag on it, and said that this was a standard. And I talked about it, and it was simple, but I think it was effective.

It helped people understand what was going on. So maybe a sword, an animal jawbone, a scroll, a piece of broken pottery might serve the telling of the narrative. Again, props, though, tend to take on a life of their own.

So be very careful that that's not what people remember. They don't have a clue what you preached about. But boy, they sure remember that cool prop.

Something else to think about is the platform, the stage, the podium from which you preach. In general, I think it's helpful to have a little bit more space when you preach an Old Testament narrative. Often storytellers move around a little bit, but the area doesn't have to be large.

It simply needs to be free from clutter. One issue in some settings is the presence of a pulpit. I appreciate what pulpits symbolize, the preaching of the word of God, but I don't feel bound to have a pulpit because they don't appear in Scripture.

And I remember a time when a preacher by the name of Ray Steadman preached at a church where I pastored. And before his sermon, he moved out from behind the pulpit and stood in front of it. And he joked about hiding behind what Charles had in Spurgeon called a coward's castle.

Honestly, through the years, I've watched preachers improve their communication by getting out from behind the pulpit. As Don Sanukian, a great teacher of preachers, tells his students, there's really no communication advantage to standing behind a box. So if a pulpit's a permanent fixture in your worship setting, that's fine.

But maybe figure out how you can, at times, move out from behind it when preaching a narrative. Now, again, preaching is not acting, but I do believe it can be helpful to move from one spot to another. I always tell preaching students, so don't pace back and forth.

It's fine to talk while you're moving, but move from point A to point B and then back, and then maybe to point C and back. You can talk while you're moving, but once you're there, stay put. Pacing back and forth while you preach is visually distracting unless you are in a narrative where the character is pacing back and forth or where that seems to be an appropriate way to communicate their thinking through an issue, you know, maybe David in his palace or something like that.

But I would encourage you, as you think about the stage or the area where you're preaching, if you're going to be moving, have some designated spots. Maybe if you're in the Book of Ruth, here's a spot for, well, let's put it this way: if you're looking at me and you're looking at a map, Moab would be over here, and Israel would be over here. So maybe when I'm talking about Moab, I move in, I'm moving here.

When I'm talking about Israel, I'm standing in this spot or in 1 Samuel 15. If we have a dialogue going between Samuel and Saul, maybe in one spot, this will be King Saul. This will be the prophet, Samuel.

Now, what you have to make sure, though, is that you don't get those mixed up. And every time I preach those, I mix up their names. That's one problem.

So if you add spots, that could be another problem. But I do think that can be effective. People may not register what you're doing, but visually, it will actually enhance your communication.

So as you continue to preach, yeah, deliver your words from a fixed point. Use gestures. I mean, you can do a lot with your body.

You can pivot, but stay put in that particular place. When we talk about sermon delivery, another matter that's really important is how you use your voice. And this applies to any passage in Scripture that you preach.

But I think it's especially important when you communicate a narrative, because you're a storyteller. And one thing that good storytellers do is they use good vocal variety. That means varying your pitch.

Sometimes you're going to go lower with your voice, and other times you're going to go higher, just like I did. Sometimes the volume is going to be loud, but at other times it may need to be softer. And by the way, when you speak more softly, you do need to project your voice.

Aim your voice at the person who's sitting in the last row. And then also your rate. Sometimes you're going to be moving through something and saying it more quickly, but then there can be the need to slow down.

It doesn't always have to be that pronounced. Use a combination of those elements, both your pitch, that is higher or lower, your volume, loud or softer, and also your rate, fast or slower. Use a combination of those to convey the emotion of what the character says.

Or remember some of those key statements by the narrator. You can set those up. And maybe you'll even pause for a moment.

By the way, a well-placed pause is a really powerful tool in the hands or in the mouth of a skillful communicator. So use those well. By the way, the general rule is that you are not being as dramatic as you think.

I've learned that over the years. For example, if you're moving from loud to soft, it may seem to you like the volume drops from a level nine to a level two. And then when you listen to it, you say, "Wow, that's only a six to a four."

It's not that big a difference. So you can be a little bit more pronounced. That's the same thing with your gestures.

You might feel like you're gesturing out here. And then you watch a video, and you're right here. So generally, you can exaggerate your contrast a little bit more.

Again, when you deliver your story, I would encourage you to use large gestures. By the way, that helps preachers get rid of nervousness. You don't have to pace back and forth.

Just use a large gesture, and that helps. You know what? Storytelling really lends itself to gesturing more than any other form of communication. Using your hands, you can toss wheat into the air with a pitchfork, like the Israelites on a threshing floor.

You can draw a bowstring and shoot an arrow. By the way, that wasn't a very good release, but you have to exaggerate that for your listeners. You can point to Jerusalem or to a well or to the field of Boaz.

You can shield the sun from your eyes. There are so many things that you can do where you're acting out the scene, but you're doing it in a way that's helping your audience visualize what you're constructing. Again, make sure that if you have a place where this is Jerusalem, you keep Jerusalem in the same spot.

You go here to Jerusalem, here to Jerusalem, here to Jerusalem, and then later you go here to Jerusalem. Your listeners aren't going to say, wait a minute, Jerusalem's over here. Well, they might.

But even if they miss that you made a mistake, I think there's going to be a disconnect. They may not be able to understand why, but there is some kind of a disconnect. Well, it's because you went over here for Jerusalem when Jerusalem is actually over there.

So those are some practical things that you have to think of. Furthermore, remember that your congregation sees everything backward. If you are talking about a map, if you're talking about, let's say, somebody traveling from Jerusalem, maybe you're preaching on captivity, one of the narratives later in Kings, and you're going to talk about the people going into captivity, you have to remember that it's like you're standing behind the map.

And so if this is Jerusalem, Babylon is over here, isn't it? So it's just the opposite. You're not looking at the map. If you're looking at the map and you say they go from Jerusalem over to Babylon, that makes sense to you, but it's backward to your listeners.

So that's something that you have to think about. Eye contact is huge. Haddon Robinson used to say that almost without exception, a congregation will not listen intently to a speaker who doesn't look at them.

And you don't have to look at every person in the audience, all of your listeners, but you need to look specifically at people. One of the things that I realized I was doing, actually, Haddon Robinson pointed out once, as he said, you're looking over the heads of people. You're looking out, but you're not looking them in the eye.

And so that was really helpful. So look at one listener in the eye and then look at someone else and move around. And again, the goal is not simply looking at listeners, but it's talking with them.

And we talk best when we are looking people in the eye. Now, it's true. Storytelling might require some moments where you gaze over the audience, where you kind of look into space.

I mean, that signifies that you're thinking. And I even did that with a gesture. But even if your arms are crossed or whatever you're doing gesture-wise, but you're talking to your people, but then you're talking about a character who's thinking about something, that's fine.

But again, that's a strategic gesture, isn't it? That's not just me being lazy. And you know what? It is fine. Even storytellers sometimes will kind of look off into space to gather a thought.

But then it's got to be right back looking in the eyes of our listeners. And again, pay attention to timing. Pay attention to the pause.

As one communicator said, the language of silence and timing can be more powerful than verbal language. Pauses give your listeners time to participate, to think, to process your story. So consider a couple of seconds of silence before you deliver a key line in your narrative.

That's really good advice. I have a friend who is a phenomenal communicator. And he is so smooth that, at one point, some people in his congregation who were pretty sharp in speech communication, I think one of them might have taught that, said to him, "You know what? You need a little bit more roughness in your communication because you're so smooth, and there's no pausing.

And they said, it's kind of like walking on a slippery floor. You can't get any traction. And I thought, "Wow, I never would have thought about that.

But that makes sense. Sometimes I catch myself getting excited about what I'm saying, and I just keep going and going and going. And it's hard for people to keep up if you don't stop and pause.

And when you pause, you give people the opportunity to kind of take an emotional breath, a little break from what you've said. It's going to accent either what you just said or what you are about to say. Again, those are kind of verbal delivery techniques that can work with any kind of literature.

But storytelling is especially important. Like a Christmas present that you ship from one state to another. That Old Testament story that you plan to deliver has to arrive at its destination, or the sermon has failed.

So hopefully, some of these ideas will help you communicate more effectively so that when people listen to a narrative, they will be wowed by the story. But more importantly, they will get the message. In the final session, I will try to demonstrate what we've talked about, and I will actually preach a sermon.

So until then, keep working on your delivery of the sermon that you are preparing.

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