

**Dr. Steven D. Mathewson,
Preaching Old Testament Narratives,**

Session 1, Study Guide:

The Challenge of Preaching Old Testament Narratives

Abstract:

In this introductory session, **Dr. Steven D. Mathewson** addresses the common difficulties and importance of **preaching Old Testament narratives**. He argues that while stories are a primary way humans learn and connect, many pastors **neglect or mishandle** these texts in favor of New Testament epistles. This struggle often stems from viewing stories as **childish fluff**, feeling frustrated by their **subtle delivery**, or being overly reliant on **analytical, alliterative outlines** that do not fit the nature of storytelling. Mathewson insists that these narratives are **theologically rich** and essential for a complete understanding of the Bible's message. To bridge this gap, he proposes a strategy that combines **rigorous interpretation** with a fluid, artistic approach to sermon delivery. Ultimately, his goal is to help speakers move past **mechanical methods** to effectively communicate the prophetic and historical power of ancient scriptural stories.

Briefing Document:

The Challenge of Preaching Old Testament Narratives

Executive Summary

The preaching of Old Testament (OT) narratives presents a significant paradox: while stories comprise 30% to 40% of the Old Testament and possess a unique power to engage and "disciple" the human heart, they are frequently neglected or poorly executed in contemporary pulpits. Dr. Steven D. Mathewson argues that preachers often struggle with narrative because they view it as "fluff" for children, become

frustrated by its inherent subtlety, or attempt to force stories into rigid analytical outlines that strip them of their power.

To preach the Old Testament effectively, one must recognize that historiography in the Bible is prophetic and ideological—it is history written to make a theological point. Effective narrative preaching requires a shift from a "lawyer's brief" homiletical style to a more fluid, artistic process that respects the way stories "show" rather than simply "tell" truth.

The Power and Prevalence of Narrative

Dr. Mathewson identifies narrative as a fundamental mode of human existence and communication. The following points highlight why narratives are essential for the faith community:

- **Heart Engagement:** James K.A. Smith notes that "our hearts traffic in stories." Stories are not merely illustrations; they plant ideas and emotions, effectively discipling the listener.
- **Listener Attentiveness:** The late R.C. Sproul observed that congregations listen "10 times as hard to a story" compared to abstract lessons.
- **Canonical Weight:** Narrative is the most prevalent genre in the Old Testament, accounting for at least 30% to 40% of the text.
- **Adult Language:** Contrary to the view that stories are for children, Eugene Peterson argued that story is the "most adult form of language" and the most serious vehicle for truth.

Five Factors Contributing to Narrative Neglect

Preachers often favor New Testament epistles over OT narratives due to several professional and theological hurdles:

| Factor | Description |
|------------------------------------|--|
| Viewing Stories as "Fluff" | The perception that narratives are for children's ministry ("down in the basement") while "big people upstairs" study the epistles. |
| Frustration with Subtlety | Narratives typically "show" rather than "tell." This indirectness can feel subjective or inefficient to those wanting direct bullet points. |
| Minimizing Canonical Role | Using OT stories only as illustrations for New Testament (NT) truths rather than recognizing them as foundational doctrine. |
| Language/Scope Intimidation | The sheer size of the OT and the perceived difficulty of Hebrew can lead preachers to retreat to the more manageable Greek and shorter history of the NT. |
| Homiletical Enslavement | The tendency to force a story into an analytical "caption survey" outline, using alliteration and parallelism that do not reflect how stories actually work. |

Theological and Interpretive Foundations

The Ideological Nature of History

Mathewson cites scholar Ian Provan to argue that all historiography in the OT is "ideological literature." This means authors select specific historical facts to communicate a prophetic message.

- **Example:** Just as different biographies of Abraham Lincoln (e.g., *Team of Rivals* vs. *Lincoln's Sword*) select different facts to highlight different aspects of his leadership, OT authors select details from "A to Z" to make a specific point.
- **The Former Prophets:** In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are known as the "Former Prophets," indicating they are intended to deliver a prophetic message through historical narrative.

The "Unhitching" Debate

The document addresses a modern movement, led by figures like Andy Stanley, to "unhitch" the Christian faith from the Old Testament to make it more palatable in a skeptical marketplace. Mathewson rejects this, aligning with Brent Strawn's view that the solution is to learn the "entire language" of both Testaments to prevent misreadings and maintain biblical balance.

Practical Methodology for Preachers

The "Driver's Education" Analogy

To master narrative preaching, Mathewson suggests breaking the process down into mechanical component parts before reassembling them into a "fluid and artistic" motion.

- **Hermeneutics/Exegesis:** First, study the text to understand what the writer is communicating.
- **Homiletics:** Second, craft a sermon that reflects the narrative's structure.
- **The Skeleton:** An outline should be like a human skeleton—essential for support but not necessarily visible to the audience.

The Role of Original Languages

While knowledge of biblical Hebrew provides an "edge," it is not a prerequisite for effective narrative preaching.

- Narrative is the easiest type of literature to read in Hebrew (far easier than Isaiah or the Psalms).
- Careful reading of English translations and the use of modern tools can compensate for a lack of Hebrew training.

Avoiding the "Lawyer's Brief"

Mathewson critiques the "alliteration and parallelism" recipe often used in evangelical circles. Forcing a narrative into three points starting with the same letter (e.g., "The Determination, The Decree, The Decision") often makes the Word of God "subservient to one particular technical kind of reason" rather than letting the story speak on its own terms.

Conclusion

The challenge of Old Testament narratives lies in respecting their unique literary form. Rather than viewing them as optional illustrations or complex puzzles to be dissected into lists, the preacher must approach them as sophisticated, adult literature that demands a fluid, artistic delivery. The next phase of this study will address the ongoing debate regarding Christ-centered preaching within these narratives.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: The Challenge of Preaching Old Testament Narratives

This study guide provides a comprehensive review of the foundational concepts, challenges, and strategies involved in preaching Old Testament (OT) narratives, based on the teachings of Dr. Steven D. Mathewson.

Part 1: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided text.

1. Who is Dr. Steven D. Mathewson, and what is his background regarding Old Testament narratives?
2. What percentage of the Old Testament is comprised of narrative literature, and why is this significant for preachers?
3. According to Wesley Cord, why do many churches and preachers "sell narrative short"?
4. How does Eugene Peterson respond to the idea that stories are "not quite adult" or "not quite serious"?
5. What is the "subtlety of narrative," and why does it frustrate some preachers?
6. What is David Duhl's "needed corrective" regarding the use of Old Testament stories as illustrations?

7. Explain Ian Provan's concept that all historiography is also "ideological literature."
8. What is the "unhitching" debate mentioned in the text, and what is the proposed alternative?
9. Why does Dr. Mathewson argue against using a strictly analytical, alliterated outline for narrative sermons?
10. Does a preacher need to be an expert in biblical Hebrew to effectively preach Old Testament narratives?

Part 2: Answer Key

1. **Who is Dr. Steven D. Mathewson, and what is his background regarding Old Testament narratives?** Dr. Mathewson is a preaching pastor with 39 years of experience and an adjunct professor at Moody Theological Seminary and Western Seminary. He authored *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* and holds a PhD in Hebrew Bible, focusing on how linguistics applies to the study of narrative literature.
2. **What percentage of the Old Testament is comprised of narrative literature, and why is this significant for preachers?** Stories account for approximately 30 to 40 percent of the Old Testament according to conservative estimates. This is significant because, as R.C. Sproul noted, people often listen "10 times as hard" to a story as they do to an abstract lesson, giving preachers a natural advantage.
3. **According to Wesley Cord, why do many churches and preachers "sell narrative short"?** Cord argues that narrative is often viewed as optional or a matter of taste rather than a necessity. He suggests that people frequently disdain narrative as a form of discourse better suited for children or "underdeveloped" people than for the educated and sophisticated.
4. **How does Eugene Peterson respond to the idea that stories are "not quite adult" or "not quite serious"?** Peterson attributes the dismissal of stories to ignorance, arguing that the story is actually "the most adult form of language" and the most serious form into which language can be put. He believes an

appreciation for story is imperative for pastors because so much of God's truth is communicated through narrative.

5. **What is the "subtlety of narrative," and why does it frustrate some preachers?** Narrative subtlety refers to the fact that stories typically "show" rather than "tell," often requiring the reader to "connect the dots" to find the point. This indirect approach frustrates preachers who prefer the direct, propositional style of New Testament epistles where the meaning is laid out explicitly.
6. **What is David Duhl's "needed corrective" regarding the use of Old Testament stories as illustrations?** Duhl warns that using Old Testament narratives only to illustrate New Testament teaching ignores vital instruction on creation, law, and covenant. He argues that failing to treat OT narratives as primary teaching material creates a "biblical imbalance" in a preacher's theological framework.
7. **Explain Ian Provan's concept that all historiography is also "ideological literature."** Provan argues that while history writing deals with facts, it is "ideological" because authors select specific historical details to make a particular point or deliver a message. This does not violate the history; rather, it uses historical truth to communicate a specific prophetic or theological perspective.
8. **What is the "unhitching" debate mentioned in the text, and what is the proposed alternative?** Pastor Andy Stanley suggested "unhitching" Christian teaching from the Old Testament to avoid skepticism in a science-focused world. However, scholars like Brent Strawn argue for the alternative of learning the "entire language" of both testaments together to properly understand and challenge misreadings.
9. **Why does Dr. Mathewson argue against using a strictly analytical, alliterated outline for narrative sermons?** He argues that good storytellers do not convey their messages through analytical lawyer-style briefs or alliterated captions. While a "skeleton" or outline is necessary for the preacher, forcing a story into a rigid, analytical structure can be "disastrous" because it is not how stories naturally work.

10. **Does a preacher need to be an expert in biblical Hebrew to effectively preach Old Testament narratives?** No, Dr. Mathewson clarifies that preachers can understand narratives by reading English Bibles carefully and using available tools. However, he notes that Hebrew narrative is the easiest type of literature to read in the original language and can provide a "skillful" edge to one's study.
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Part 3: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the following questions to reflect more deeply on the themes of the text.

1. **The Psychology of Storytelling:** Analyze the claim that "our hearts traffic in stories." How does the prevalence of storytelling in modern media (movies, sports, social media) support or challenge the necessity of preaching Old Testament narratives in a contemporary church setting?
2. **The Epistle Bias:** Dr. Mathewson notes a common tendency for churches to gravitate toward New Testament epistles for "serious" study while relegating OT stories to children's ministry. Discuss the potential long-term theological consequences for a congregation that views the Old Testament primarily as "fluff."
3. **The Prophetic Nature of History:** The Hebrew Bible categorizes Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings as the "Former Prophets." How should this classification change a preacher's approach to these books compared to viewing them merely as "historical" records?
4. **Artistic vs. Mechanical Homiletics:** Using Dr. Mathewson's driving manual analogy, discuss the tension between learning the "component parts" of preaching and the goal of a "fluid and artistic" delivery. Why is it necessary to first break the process down into mechanical steps?
5. **The Role of Alliteration and Analysis:** Critique the "caption survey form" of preaching (e.g., the "V-word" outline). Is there ever a place for analytical outlines in narrative preaching, or does the structure inherently "make the Word of God subservient to one particular technical kind of reason"?

Part 4: Glossary of Key Terms

- **Analytical Style:** A homiletical method that treats a text like a "lawyer's brief," dissecting and rearranging it into a series of logical points.
- **Caption Survey Form:** A popular evangelical preaching style characterized by an outline of parallel points, often featuring alliteration, meant for easy note-taking.
- **Expository Preaching:** A preaching method that works through blocks of biblical texts or entire books to "expose" and unpack their inherent meaning.
- **Former Prophets:** The Hebrew Bible's classification for the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, indicating they deliver a prophetic message through history.
- **Hermeneutics:** The branch of knowledge that deals with the interpretation of literary texts, specifically the Bible.
- **Historiography:** The study or writing of history; in this context, the way Old Testament authors recorded historical events to convey a message.
- **Homiletics:** The art of preaching or writing and delivering sermons.
- **Ideological Literature:** Literature—including history—that is written with the intent of making a specific point or promoting a particular worldview.
- **Linguistics:** The scientific study of language and its structure, applied by Dr. Mathewson to understand how Old Testament stories communicate.
- **Subtlety (of Narrative):** The indirect literary approach where the meaning is "shown" through action and character rather than stated directly in propositions.