

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

Abstract:

Dr. Steven D. Mathewson outlines a strategic framework for transitioning from **textual study** to the delivery of **impactful sermons** based on Old Testament narratives. Using mountain climbing as a metaphor, he suggests that while discovering a story's meaning is a feat, the difficult work lies in making that truth **accessible to a congregation**. Preachers are encouraged to ask four essential questions that address the **biblical storyline**, the need for **cultural explanation**, the **validation of truth claims**, and personal **application**. Mathewson warns against **moralizing** and stresses the importance of connecting every narrative to the **gospel of Jesus Christ**. Ultimately, he advises speakers to refine their core message into a **memorable preaching idea** that is clear, concise, and concrete. This process ensures that ancient stories result in **modern transformation** rather than just historical information.

Briefing Document:

Briefing: Moving from Exegesis to Sermon Construction in Old Testament Narratives

Executive Summary

The transition from exegetical study (understanding the text) to sermon construction (delivering the message) is often more difficult than the initial study itself. Using the metaphor of a Mount Everest expedition, reaching the "exegetical summit" is a significant feat, but the "descent"—delivering the goods to a modern congregation—is the dangerous and challenging part of the journey.

To successfully navigate this transition, a preacher must analyze the "exegetical expression" of their big idea by answering four developmental questions:

1. **Connection:** How does this theological message connect to the Bible's storyline (meta-narrative)?
2. **Explanation:** What do listeners need to have explained?
3. **Validation:** Where might listeners disagree or struggle with the truth claims?
4. **Application:** How does God want the listener to respond?

The goal is to move from a raw theological concept to a "preaching idea" that is clear, concise, concrete, and creative, ensuring the message is memorable and life-changing for the audience.

The Metaphor of the Descent

Mountain climbers like John Krakauer and David Breshears observe that reaching the summit of Everest is only the halfway point; the descent is the most dangerous phase. In preaching Old Testament (OT) narratives, the exegetical work is the climb. Once the theological message is discovered at the "summit," the preacher faces the hard work of bringing that message down to the congregation in a way that is relevant and understandable.

Question 1: Connecting to the Bible Storyline

Every OT narrative belongs to a larger meta-narrative centered on Jesus the Messiah. Preachers must engage in **biblical theology**, tracing the development of major themes across the arc of Scripture.

The Central Storyline: God's Presence

While many themes exist (covenant, kingdom, city of God), the Bible's storyline can be summarized in one sentence: **The Bible is the story of God reestablishing the gift of His presence.**

Stage	Description
Beginning	Genesis 1-2: God dwells with His people in a garden paradise (the first "temple").
Middle	God dwells with His people in the Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple, and eventually through Jesus (Emmanuel) and the Church.
End	Revelation 21-22: A finished city where God dwells with His people eternally.

Establishing the Connection

Preachers should connect OT narratives to the New Covenant by:

- Reminding listeners that they can only respond to the narrative's message through the grace of Jesus Christ.
- Identifying lines of continuity and discontinuity between the OT message and the New Covenant.
- Noting where characters prefigure Christ (e.g., David as the warrior king, or Jesus as the "true and better" Abigail or Josiah).
- **Caution:** Typology should not be forced or allowed to eclipse the actual theological message of the text.

Question 2: The Explanation Question

Listeners cannot apply what they do not understand. Preachers must identify "explanation gaps" where a listener might say, "I don't understand that."

- **Cultural Context:** Explaining ancient customs, such as the kinsman-redeemer concept in Ruth, the significance of sitting at the town gate, or the sandal-removing ceremony.
- **Theological Implications:** Explaining why an action was significant (e.g., the gravity of Elimelech leaving Israel for Moab).
- **Linguistic Clarity:** Defining names (e.g., Naomi, Boaz) or complex terms like "loyal love" (hesed).

Question 3: The Validation Question

This is the "prove-it" question, often associated with communicators like C.S. Lewis or Tim Keller. Preachers must anticipate and respond to the objections of listeners who might say, "I'm not sure I buy that."

Example: The Book of Esther

- **Big Idea:** Even when you can't see or hear God, He is in control of your destiny.
- **Validation:** The text itself provides the proof. The story demonstrates God overcoming a poor spiritual climate, impossible people in high places, and unpredictable events (like the casting of lots) to defend His people.

Question 4: The Application Question

Haddon Robinson famously noted that "more heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis." The primary pitfall is **moralizing**—reducing the narrative to peripheral moral lessons.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls

1. **Careless Reading:** Missing the author's point. (e.g., Using Gideon's fleece as a paradigm for finding God's will, when Gideon actually already knew God's will and simply lacked faith).
2. **Focusing on Peripheral Details:** (e.g., Focusing on David's idleness in the spring as the primary takeaway of 2 Samuel 11, rather than the intended theological message of the narrator).

Framework for Application

To apply OT narratives to New Covenant believers, preachers should ask:

- **Character Actions:** Should the application be based on what characters do? (e.g., In the Ehud story, the point is not "use your unique traits" like his left-handedness, but "God delivers from hopeless situations.")
- **Ethical Thrust:** What is the story's "pragmatic" function? Does it serve as a warning, an encouragement, or a call to action?

- **New Covenant Relation:** Does the message carry over? (e.g., Idolatry in Judges 17-18 remains a central concern in the New Testament).
- **Concrete Situations:** Application must be specific to the listeners' "zip codes" and daily lives. Vague application leads to vague Christian living.

Synthesizing the Preaching Idea

Once the exegetical idea is refined through these four questions, it must be packaged into a **preaching idea**. Ideas only "stick" when they are properly packaged.

Characteristics of a "Sticky" Idea

- **Clear:** Better than being clever.
- **Concise:** Ideally between 9 and 15 words.
- **Concrete:** Using vivid, non-abstract language.
- **Creative:** Using language that is memorable without being trite or silly.

Comparison of Ideas:

- **Forgettable:** "One value of a relationship is a way that two parties bring about personal growth in each other."
- **Sticky (Proverbs 27):** "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."
- **Conversational:** Changing "The idolatry of God's people will cause them to miss out on the presence of God" to "When we turn from God to idols, we miss out on God's presence."

Conclusion

Effective preaching of Old Testament narratives requires high-level, prayerful thinking that moves beyond mere study. By addressing the meta-narrative, explaining the context, validating truth claims, and providing concrete application, preachers can construct messages that make a significant difference in the lives of their listeners.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Moving from Exegesis to Sermon Construction in Old Testament Narratives

This study guide provides a comprehensive review of Dr. Steven D. Mathewson's sixth session on preaching Old Testament narratives. It focuses on the critical transition from the "exegetical summit"—understanding the text's original meaning—to the practical construction of a sermon that effectively communicates that truth to a modern congregation.

Short-Answer Quiz

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

1. Explain the analogy of the Mount Everest expedition in the context of sermon preparation.
2. According to the text, what is the "meta-narrative" of the Bible and who is its center?
3. How does Dr. Mathewson summarize the entire storyline of the Bible in a single sentence?
4. What are the two specific ways preachers can connect an Old Testament narrative to the larger storyline of the Bible?
5. Identify the three "functional" or "developmental" questions attributed to Haddon Robinson and explain their logical order.
6. What is the "validation question," and why is it sometimes referred to as the "Tim Keller question"?
7. What is the primary danger of "moralizing" when applying Old Testament narratives?
8. How do the concepts of "semantics" and "pragmatics" help a preacher determine the ethical thrust of a narrative?

9. According to the text, what are the requirements for a preacher to utilize "cultural intelligence" in their application?
 10. What are the four characteristics of a well-packaged "preaching idea," and what is the suggested word count for such an idea?
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Answer Key

1. **The Everest Analogy:** Reaching the exegetical summit is discovering the narrative's theological message, which Dr. Mathewson calls the "easy part." The "hard part" is the descent, which represents constructing the sermon and "delivering the goods" to the congregation in a way they can understand and apply.
2. **Meta-narrative:** The meta-narrative is the larger storyline of the Bible to which every Old Testament narrative belongs. This overarching story finds its ultimate center and fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah.
3. **Bible Storyline Summary:** The text suggests that the Bible is the story of God reestablishing the gift of His presence. It begins and ends in a garden paradise where God dwells with His people, moving from a potential building site in Genesis to a finished city in Revelation.
4. **Connecting to the Storyline:** Preachers should remind listeners that they can only respond to a text's message through the grace provided by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Additionally, they must identify lines of continuity or discontinuity between the Old Testament theological message and the New Covenant.
5. **Functional Questions:** The questions are: "What do my listeners need me to explain?" (understanding), "Where do they not agree?" (belief/validation), and "How does this relate to life?" (behavior/application). Their logical order is essential because a listener cannot apply what they do not accept, and they cannot accept what they do not understand.
6. **Validation Question:** This is the "prove-it" question where the preacher anticipates where listeners might doubt or disagree with a truth claim. It is

called the "Tim Keller question" because Keller was exceptionally skilled at anticipating and responding to the objections of his audience.

7. **Danger of Moralizing:** Moralizing reduces a sermon's application to simple moral lessons from a character's life that are often peripheral to the actual theological message. This can lead to an application that rests on a faulty reading of the narrative or focuses on details the author did not intend as the primary ethical thrust.
8. **Semantics vs. Pragmatics:** Semantics refers to what a statement means (the definition), while pragmatics refers to how that statement functions in its context (warning, encouragement, or call to action). Preachers must use pragmatics to determine how the theological message of a narrative should "land" with the audience.
9. **Cultural Intelligence:** Utilizing cultural intelligence requires a preacher to know their audience beyond their names and professions. They must understand the cultures and subcultures their listeners identify with, including their dreams, fears, sources of pain, and what they hold most dear.
10. **Preaching Idea Characteristics:** A preaching idea should be clear, concise, concrete, and creative. Ideally, it should be stated in nine to fifteen words to ensure it is both memorable and compelling for the listeners.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the provided source context to develop detailed responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Role of Biblical Theology in Preaching:** Discuss how Dr. Mathewson uses biblical theology to bridge the gap between Old Testament narratives and New Covenant believers. Focus on the themes of "temple" and "presence" as organizing principles.
2. **The Ethics of Typology:** Evaluate the use of characters like David or Abigail as "types" of Christ. Discuss the benefits of this approach as well as the warnings provided against letting typology "eclipse" the theological message of the specific text.

3. **The Logical Progression of Persuasion:** Analyze Haddon Robinson's framework for moving from explanation to validation to application. Why is this specific order critical for effective communication, and what happens to a sermon if one of these steps is ignored?
4. **Avoiding Interpretive Pitfalls:** Compare and contrast the two major pitfalls in application mentioned in the text: basing application on a "faulty reading" (using the example of Gideon) versus basing it on "peripheral details" (using the example of David and Bathsheba).
5. **The Art of the Preaching Idea:** Explain why Dr. Mathewson argues that "clear is better than clever." Discuss how a preacher can turn an abstract exegetical idea into a "sticky" preaching idea using the examples of Proverbs or the UPS slogan.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Big Idea	A concise summary of the theological message derived from exegetical study, intended to be the central point of the sermon.
Biblical Theology	The discipline of tracing the arc of the Bible's storyline by noting the development of major themes (like covenant, redemption, or temple) across the scriptures.
Discontinuity	Points where the theological message or requirements of an Old Testament narrative do not carry over unchanged into the New Covenant era.
Exegesis	The process of careful, systematic study of a biblical text to discover its original, intended meaning.
Functional Questions	Developmental questions (Explain, Prove, Apply) used during sermon construction to address the understanding, beliefs, and behaviors of the audience.

Kinsman-Redeemer	A specific Old Testament legal and social concept found in the book of Ruth that may require explanation for modern audiences.
Meta-narrative	The overarching, "larger storyline" of the Bible that connects individual stories into a unified whole centered on Jesus the Messiah.
Moralizing	The practice of reducing biblical application to moral lessons from characters' lives that are peripheral to the text's primary theological message.
Pragmatics	A linguistic concept referring to how a statement functions in its context (e.g., whether a statement is meant as a warning or an encouragement).
Semantics	A linguistic concept referring to the literal meaning or definition of words and statements.
Typology	An interpretive method where Old Testament people or events (types) are seen to prefigure or anticipate New Testament realities, particularly Jesus Christ.
