

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

Abstract:

In this transcript, **Dr. Steven D. Mathewson** explains how to effectively **shape and outline sermons** based on **Old Testament narratives**. He argues against traditional **deductive methods** that reveal the main point early, suggesting instead that preachers should use **inductive arrangement** to mirror the **suspense and resolution** of a story. By utilizing **strategic delay**, a speaker can maintain audience interest and let the **theological big idea** emerge naturally at the conclusion. Mathewson also provides practical tips for **sermon outlining**, advising pastors to view main points as **internal maps** rather than clever headings to be memorized by the congregation. He emphasizes that outlines should consist of **complete sentences** that follow the **major movements or scenes** of the biblical text. Ultimately, the goal is to create a **simple, sturdy structure** that supports the narrative without overshadowing the **transformative message** of the scripture.

Briefing Document:

Shaping and Outlining the Old Testament Narrative Sermon

Executive Summary

The primary challenge in preaching Old Testament narratives is selecting a form that respects the story's original structure and prophetic message. Traditional homiletical advice—telling the audience what you will tell them before doing so—is often ineffective for narrative texts because it prematurely resolves the story's inherent tension. Effective narrative preaching requires an inductive approach, utilizing "strategic delay" to withhold the central "big idea" until the end of the sermon. This method creates suspense and allows the audience to experience a sense of discovery. Outlines for such sermons should be viewed as internal roadmaps for the preacher rather than mnemonic devices for the congregation, focusing on "movements" or "scenes" that typically mirror the story's crisis and resolution.

The Critique of Principle-Based Preaching

Many preachers approach Old Testament narratives by extracting a list of principles or techniques. Common examples include:

- Three keys to impossible living (Moses).
- Techniques for overcoming a painful past (Joseph).
- Principles about the testing of faith (Abraham).
- Reasons to say no to temptation (Joseph).

While common, this tactic often fails to do justice to the biblical author's style and the narrative's prophetic message. Instead of letting the story speak, the preacher uses the narrative merely to illustrate external principles—often derived from the New Testament—that are "read back" into the text.

Inductive vs. Deductive Arrangement

Preachers must choose between two major ways of presenting ideas: deduction and induction.

Feature	Deduction	Induction
Starting Point	The conclusion or "the whole."	Specific details and pieces.
Structure	Gives the answer upfront, then explains it.	Conclusion is unknown until the end.
Strengths	Clarity.	Suspense, sense of discovery, "the edge."
Risks	Can be boring; eliminates tension.	Can be unclear if poorly executed.
Scriptural Basis	Common in New Testament epistles. The way stories naturally work.	

The Power of Induction

Because stories rarely provide answers upfront, preaching them should mirror this inductive flow. This requires maintaining "strategic delay," where the "big idea" is not front-loaded but saved for the end to achieve an "aha moment."

The Role of Tension and Strategic Delay

Tension is described as the preacher's "friend." In narrative preaching, when the tension ends, the sermon is effectively over. Preachers can maintain tension through:

- **Withholding Key Details:** In Judges 17 and 18, the narrator mentions a "house of God" early on but withholds the clarifying detail that the true house of God was in Shiloh until the very last line. Wise preachers reserve comment on such details until the end.
- **Strategic Emphasis:** In 2 Samuel 11-12, a preacher might mention Uriah's noble words in chapter 11 but avoid lingering on them until the end of the narrative, where they can be contrasted effectively with David's failure of character.

- **Managing Pre-known Outcomes:** Even when the audience knows the outcome (e.g., Achan's sin in Joshua 7), tension remains in the *process* of discovery.

Strategies for Effective Outlining

The sermon outline serves as a "sturdy frame" or skeleton. Just as a house's framing is eventually covered by sheetrock, the audience does not need to see the outline for it to provide necessary support.

1. Focus on Structure over Memorability

Outlines should not be designed as alliterative lists for the audience to remember. They are roadmaps to help the preacher communicate key ideas.

2. View Main Points as Endings

While stories are inductive, outlines often look deductive. In narrative preaching, a "main point" should be the idea that *emerges* at the end of a movement or section of the text, rather than a heading announced at the start.

3. Use Full Sentences

Main points should be stated in complete sentences rather than mere topics (e.g., "The problem of idolatry"). Full sentences force clear thinking and prevent thoughts from "slipping through the mind."

4. Think in "Moves" or "Scenes"

Instead of traditional "points," preachers should think in terms of movements through the story. Each move represents a section where a specific element—a scene, conversation, or theological idea—takes shape in the listener's mind.

5. Limit the Number of Points

Preachers should aim for two to four main points to reflect major movements. A common structure for a narrative sermon involves two points:

1. **The Crisis:** The problem or complication.
2. **The Resolution:** The outcome or solution (positive or negative).

If an outline exceeds four points, it is likely too complex and should be simplified by combining points or moving them to a lower level of the hierarchy.

Case Study: Judges 17-18

An example of a two-point narrative outline for a two-chapter text:

- **Point 1 (17:1–18:17) - The Crisis:** Micah and the Danites turn from God to idols.
 - *Sub-point A:* Micah builds an unauthorized religious system.
 - *Sub-point B:* The Danites abandon their assigned inheritance for unauthorized land.
 - *Sub-point C:* The Danites seize Micah's idol and priest.
- **Point 2 (18:18–31) - The Resolution:** As a result of their idolatry, Micah and the Danites fail to experience the presence of God.

- *The Big Idea*: "When we turn from God to idols, we miss out on the presence of God."

By placing the big idea at the end, the preacher maintains the "story sense" and ensures a more satisfying journey for the congregation.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Shaping and Outlining the Sermon for Old Testament Narratives

This study guide is based on the teachings of Dr. Steven D. Mathewson regarding the preparation and structure of sermons derived from Old Testament narrative texts. It focuses on the transition from the "big idea" to the formal shaping of the message through inductive reasoning and strategic outlining.

Section 1: Short-Answer Quiz

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

1. **Why does Dr. Mathewson argue against the traditional advice of "tell them what you plan to tell them" when preaching a narrative?**
2. **What is the primary difference between deductive and inductive reasoning in sermon arrangement?**
3. **What risk does a preacher take when using a deductive approach for a story?**
4. **How does the concept of "strategic delay" function in a narrative sermon?**
5. **In the context of 2 Samuel 11 and 12, why might a preacher delay commenting on Uriah's noble character?**
6. **What was the central critique offered by Haddon Robinson regarding the alliterated David and Goliath outline?**
7. **What is the purpose of the "skeleton" or "framing" analogy in relation to sermon outlines?**
8. **Why should main points in a narrative outline be viewed as "endings" rather than "beginnings"?**
9. **Why is it recommended to write outline points in full sentences rather than short captions?**
10. **How do the concepts of "crisis" and "resolution" typically shape the number of main points in a narrative sermon?**

Section 2: Answer Key

1. **Why does Dr. Mathewson argue against the traditional advice of "tell them what you plan to tell them" when preaching a narrative?** Narratives rely on

suspense and the natural unfolding of a story to engage the audience. Giving away the conclusion at the beginning results in a less satisfying journey and fails to respect the way the biblical storyteller originally composed the text.

2. **What is the primary difference between deductive and inductive reasoning in sermon arrangement?** Deduction begins with the conclusion or "whole" and then breaks it down into specific details or explanations. Induction starts with specific pieces and details, leading the audience toward a conclusion that is only revealed at the end.
3. **What risk does a preacher take when using a deductive approach for a story?** The primary risk of deduction is that it can be boring because the tension is removed once the big idea is placed "on the table" upfront. Without the discovery process inherent in a story, the audience may lose interest in the details that follow.
4. **How does the concept of "strategic delay" function in a narrative sermon?** Strategic delay involves withholding the "big idea" or a key clarifying detail until the very end of the sermon to mirror how stories naturally work. This creates an "aha moment" for the listeners, maintaining suspense throughout the message.
5. **In the context of 2 Samuel 11 and 12, why might a preacher delay commenting on Uriah's noble character?** By waiting until the end of the narrative to emphasize Uriah's words, the preacher can create a more powerful contrast with David's lack of character. This delay allows the preacher to ride the tension of the story before using Uriah as a foil to drive home the final theological point.
6. **What was the central critique offered by Haddon Robinson regarding the alliterated David and Goliath outline?** Robinson critiqued the outline for being overly formal and artificial, stating that "nobody talks like this anymore except in the pulpit." He suggested such outlines feel like they belong in outdated books rather than engaging modern listeners in a natural way.
7. **What is the purpose of the "skeleton" or "framing" analogy in relation to sermon outlines?** Just as a house frame is covered by sheetrock or a skeleton is hidden by skin, an outline provides necessary internal support without needing to be visible to the audience. The outline is a tool for the preacher's clarity and structure, not necessarily something for the congregation to memorize.
8. **Why should main points in a narrative outline be viewed as "endings" rather than "beginnings"?** Because stories work inductively, the main point of a section is the idea that emerges at the conclusion of the scenes or details. Preachers should work through subpoints (the details) to reach the main point (the realization), rather than stating the point and then proving it.
9. **Why is it recommended to write outline points in full sentences rather than short captions?** Full sentences force the preacher to "think themselves clear" and

define exactly what they are saying about a topic. Captions or partial statements are "slick" and allow important theological thoughts to slip through the mind without being fully developed.

10. **How do the concepts of "crisis" and "resolution" typically shape the number of main points in a narrative sermon?** Many narrative sermons effectively use two main points: one for the crisis (the problem or complication) and one for the resolution (the outcome or solution). This keeps the structure simple and ensures the sermon follows the natural arc of the biblical story.
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Section 3: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the principles discussed by Dr. Mathewson to provide in-depth responses to the following prompts.

1. Analyze the role of tension in narrative preaching. Explain why Mathewson claims that "when the tension's over, the sermon's over," and discuss how a preacher can "ride the tension" throughout a message.
 2. Compare and contrast the "list of principles" approach to preaching narratives with the "storytelling" approach. Discuss why Mathewson believes the former often fails to do justice to the prophetic message of the Old Testament.
 3. Discuss the importance of simplicity in sermon structure. What are the potential consequences of having more than four main points when preaching a narrative, and how can a preacher consolidate a complex structure?
 4. Explain the concept of "movements" or "scenes" as an alternative to traditional "points." How does thinking in movements help a preacher maintain the narrative flow of a text like 1 Samuel 15?
 5. Using the example of Micah and the Danites in Judges 17-18, describe how to construct an inductive outline for a tragedy. How does the preacher integrate the "big idea" into such an outline?
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Section 4: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Big Idea	The central theological concept or prophetic message derived from the text that the sermon aims to communicate.
Deduction	A method of arrangement where the conclusion or main point is given upfront, followed by explanation or application.
Foil	A character (such as Uriah in the David narrative) who serves to highlight the traits of another character through contrast.
Induction	A method of arrangement that begins with specific details and leads the listener to a conclusion at the end.

Movement	A section of a sermon—often corresponding to a scene or conversation—where a particular element of the story forms in the listener's mind.
Narrative Form	The strategy or style used by biblical authors to tell a story, characterized by unfolding events and delayed resolution.
Strategic Delay	The practice of withholding the sermon's central idea or a key detail until the end to maintain interest and discovery.
Tension	The sense of crisis or complication in a story that creates engagement and suspense for the audience.
