

**Dr. Steven Mathewson,  
Preaching Old Testament Narratives,  
Session 8, Study Guide:  
Storytelling, Entering and Exiting**

**Abstract:**

Dr. Steven Mathewson explains how to transform a basic sermon outline into a vivid and engaging narrative through the craft of storytelling. He emphasizes the importance of drafting a manuscript in an oral style to refine one's thinking and ensure the language sounds natural when spoken. To bring biblical characters and settings to life, speakers should utilize sensory details, active verbs, and specific nouns while avoiding the "deadening" effect of passive voice or excessive adjectives. Mathewson encourages using historical and cultural research to paint realistic mental pictures rather than simply providing dry background information. Additionally, the source provides strategies for creating concise introductions and conclusions that establish a clear need for the message and land the sermon decisively. Ultimately, the goal is to help the audience internalize the story by showing them how ancient truths apply to contemporary life.

**Briefing Document:**

Mastering Storytelling in Old Testament Narrative Preaching

Executive Summary

This briefing document synthesizes the pedagogical insights of Dr. Steven Mathewson regarding the craft of preaching Old Testament narratives. The central thesis is that a preacher must transition from a skeletal outline to a "fleshed-out" sermon by mastering the storyteller's craft. Key takeaways include the necessity of preparing word-for-word manuscripts to facilitate thinking and internalization, the adoption of an oral style that prioritizes "showing" over "telling," and the strategic use of vivid, concrete language. The document outlines specific stylistic rules—such as eliminating passive voice and

excessive modifiers—and emphasizes that both sermon introductions and conclusions must be brief, purposeful, and designed to maintain narrative momentum.

### The Foundation of Narrative Preaching: The Manuscript

Dr. Mathewson emphasizes that an outline is merely a skeleton; the preacher's task is to provide the "flesh" that makes a sermon attractive rather than bland. A primary tool for this development is the sermon manuscript.

- Writing as Thinking: Writing a manuscript word-for-word is a discipline for agonizing over language and clarifying thought.
- Internalization over Memorization: The manuscript should not be memorized or necessarily brought into the pulpit. Instead, reading it once or twice the night before the sermon allows the preacher to internalize the phrasing and details.
- Oral Style: Manuscripts should be written to sound like natural speech. This includes using incomplete sentences and a conversational tone, rather than the formal structures required for academic papers.
- Evolution of Practice: While beginners should manuscript entire sermons, experienced preachers may choose to manuscript only critical sections, such as the introduction, conclusion, or complex theological points.

### The Craft of Retelling: Balance and Imagery

The primary tactic in preaching Old Testament narratives is retelling the story well. This requires a delicate balance between the spare, lean style of the biblical authors and the descriptive detail needed for a modern audience to "feel" the scene.

### Balancing Economy and Detail

Preachers should avoid "flowery" descriptions that pursue elegance for its own sake. Instead, they should aim for a style characterized by strong verbs and simplicity. Dr. Mathewson suggests studying masters of economical prose, such as Ernest Hemingway, and creative biblical wordsmiths like Eugene Peterson.

### Recommended Literary Models

The following table outlines the resources and authors cited for developing narrative flair:

Author	Recommended Work	Contribution to Preaching
Ernest Hemingway	General Works	Models an economical style, strong verbs, and minimal use of adverbs/adjectives.
Eugene Peterson	<i>Leap Over a Wall (or Earthy Spirituality)</i>	Demonstrates how to use simple but vivid language to describe biblical realities (e.g., the "darkness" of a cave).
James Michener	<i>The Source</i>	Provides vivid historical and cultural images, such as descriptions of Canaanite practices.
Frederick Buechner	<i>Peculiar Treasures</i>	Offers witty, whimsical character sketches to "breathe color" into biblical figures.

### Stylistic Rules for Vivid Storytelling

To engage an audience, preachers must follow specific elements of style that draw listeners into the narrative world.

1. Use Concrete, Specific Words: Replace general terms with specific ones to create immediate mental pictures.
  - *General:* "unpleasant smell" *Specific:* "stench."
  - *General:* "food" *Specific:* "cornbread," "figs," or "grapes."
  - *General:* "big rock" *Specific:* "boulder."
2. Avoid Excessive Modifiers: Adjectives and adverbs often mask weak nouns and verbs. Preachers should follow Carl Sandburg's suspicion of adjectives, avoiding generalities like "fine," "bad," or "nice."
3. Eliminate "Deadeners" (Passive Voice): Passive verbs suck the vigor out of prose.
  - *Passive:* "Goliath's forehead was struck by a stone..."
  - *Active:* "David hurled a stone... and struck Goliath's forehead."
  - *Note:* AI tools can be used to flag passive voice in a manuscript, but the preacher must perform the final stylistic adjustment.

4. Refrain from Over-Cleverness: Excessive creativity can be "too much maple syrup on the pancakes." Avoid over-sensationalizing dialogue (e.g., using "bellowed" every time a character speaks).
5. Show, Don't Tell: Instead of telling the audience a character is "huge," describe the physical impact of their size (e.g., "when Goliath stood in the doorway, he filled the entire frame").

### Strategic Use of Images

Preachers should develop specific types of images to help listeners respond to the "gallery of their minds."

- Explanatory Images: These use narrative to explain historical or cultural data. Rather than saying, "Let me give you some background," the preacher should fold the research into the story itself (e.g., describing the humidity and "snarling" runoff of the Jordan River in springtime).
- Application Images: These show what biblical truth looks like "fleshed out" in the listener's modern life. For instance, comparing Barak's hesitation to a modern parent's reluctance to set boundaries on social media.

### Structural Precision: Entering and Exiting

The sermon's opening and closing must be efficient to maintain the momentum of the biblical narrative.

#### The Introduction (Entering)

A strong introduction should be brief and accomplish three goals:

1. Create Interest: Use a quotation or a "cold open" that jumps directly into a scene.
2. Raise a Need: Convince the listeners that the story addresses an issue they currently struggle with.
3. Orient to the Text: Direct the audience to the specific passage without giving away the "big idea" too early.

## The Conclusion (Exiting)

The conclusion is the time to "land the plane" swiftly. Dr. Mathewson warns against "taxiing around the airport"—continuing to talk because the preacher does not know how to stop.

- The "Aha" Moment: Reach the high point of the application and finish.
- Manuscripting the Exit: Writing the conclusion word-for-word prevents repetitive circles and ensures a powerful, decisive end to the sermon.

"Your task is to preach a sermon, not an outline. An outline is not a sermon. It resembles a skeleton without flesh."

## Study Guide:

Study Guide: Preaching Old Testament Narratives – Storytelling, Entering, and Exiting

This study guide provides a comprehensive review of Dr. Steven Mathewson's teaching on the art of preaching Old Testament narratives. It focuses on the transition from a sermon outline to a fully realized, engaging oral presentation, emphasizing the importance of vivid storytelling, precise word choice, and effective sermon structure.

Review Quiz: Short-Answer Questions

1. What does Dr. Mathewson mean when he describes a sermon outline as a "skeleton without flesh"?
2. Why is the preparation of a sermon manuscript recommended, and how should it be used during delivery?
3. How can a preacher achieve "balance between economy and detail" when retelling an Old Testament story?
4. Why is Ernest Hemingway cited as a valuable literary model for preachers?
5. How does Eugene Peterson use "constrained imagination" in his description of David and Saul in the cave?
6. What are "deadeners" in a sermon manuscript, and why should they be avoided?

7. What is the difference between an "explanatory image" and a traditional "background information" section?
  8. What is an "application image," and how does it differ from a general statement of truth?
  9. According to Haddon Robinson, what are the three primary goals of a sermon introduction?
  10. What does Dr. Mathewson mean by the warning to "land the plane" regarding sermon conclusions?
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#### Answer Key

1. What does Dr. Mathewson mean when he describes a sermon outline as a "skeleton without flesh"? Dr. Mathewson argues that a preacher's task is to preach a sermon, not just an outline. The outline provides the necessary structure, but the preacher must add "flesh" through storytelling, vivid descriptions, and creative language to make the message attractive and alive rather than bland and dry.
2. Why is the preparation of a sermon manuscript recommended, and how should it be used during delivery? Writing a manuscript is a way of thinking that forces the preacher to agonize over specific words and internalize the message. However, the manuscript is ideally not taken into the pulpit; instead, the preacher should internalize the phrasing and details so the delivery remains natural and engaging.
3. How can a preacher achieve "balance between economy and detail" when retelling an Old Testament story? While Old Testament authors use a spare, lean style, preachers must add enough detail to help listeners feel the scene without becoming overly flowery or sensational. The goal is to pursue simplicity over elegance, using descriptive language that is strictly constrained by the facts and details of the biblical text.
4. Why is Ernest Hemingway cited as a valuable literary model for preachers? Hemingway is praised for his economical writing style, characterized by the use of strong verbs and a lack of unnecessary adverbs and adjectives. His

ability to write with variety and impact using short, direct sentences provides a template for preachers trying to avoid wordy or "stale" prose.

5. How does Eugene Peterson use "constrained imagination" in his description of David and Saul in the cave? Peterson uses simple, vivid language—such as describing a cave "cut in the cliffs"—to help listeners feel the heat of the sun and the coolness of the darkness. His imagination is "constrained" because he does not invent new facts but rather fleshes out the existing biblical details to help the audience visualize the physical reality of the characters.
6. What are "deadeners" in a sermon manuscript, and why should they be avoided? "Deadeners" refer to the use of the passive voice, which sucks the life and vigor out of prose by making the subject receive the action rather than perform it. Replacing passive constructions with active verbs makes the narrative more powerful, such as saying "David hurled a stone" rather than "the stone was hurled by David."
7. What is the difference between an "explanatory image" and a traditional "background information" section? Instead of stopping the sermon to say, "Let me give you some background," an explanatory image weaves historical and cultural research directly into the narrative flow. By "painting the scene" of ancient practices like child sacrifice or geography, the preacher provides context without boring the audience or breaking the momentum of the story.
8. What is an "application image," and how does it differ from a general statement of truth? An application image shows what a biblical truth looks like when it is "fleshed out" in a modern listener's life. Rather than simply telling parents to "discipline their children," an application image might describe a parent having the courage to set boundaries on a specific smartphone app, making the truth concrete and relatable.
9. According to Haddon Robinson, what are the three primary goals of a sermon introduction? A good introduction should create interest in the topic, raise a specific need in the listener that the sermon will address, and orient the listeners to the biblical text. The ultimate goal is to make the audience feel that they *need* to hear the story because it addresses a struggle they currently face.

10. What does Dr. Mathewson mean by the warning to "land the plane" regarding sermon conclusions? This metaphor warns against the "frustration" of a conclusion that circles the point without ending, much like a pilot circling an airport. A conclusion should be brief and decisive; writing it out in manuscript form helps the preacher avoid "taxying" or repeating themselves because they don't know how to stop.

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### Essay Questions for Discussion

1. The Role of the Storyteller: Analyze the claim that "any story can bore or thrill an audience" based on the craft of the storyteller. How does the preacher's choice of verbs and nouns directly impact the audience's engagement with an ancient text?
  2. Oral vs. Written Style: Discuss the challenges of writing a sermon manuscript in an "oral style." Why might incomplete sentences and colloquialisms be more effective for a sermon than the formal grammar expected in an academic paper?
  3. Balancing Research and Creativity: Dr. Mathewson suggests using Bible dictionaries, atlases, and archaeology to "keep your imagination in line with the biblical text." How can a preacher ensure that creative descriptions (like Frederick Buechner's character sketches) remain useful without becoming "too clever" or over-sensationalized?
  4. The Momentum of Narrative: Evaluate the advice to avoid long illustrations or quotations during the retelling of the story. Why might a traditional "three-point illustration" model be counterproductive when preaching Old Testament narratives?
  5. Modernizing the Biblical World: Explore the ethics and effectiveness of using modern images—such as "Calvin Klein jeans" or "basketball game plans"—to explain biblical characters or situations. Where should a preacher draw the line to prevent these images from "getting away from them"?
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### Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
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Active Voice	A grammatical structure where the subject of the sentence performs the action; recommended for making prose more "zippy" and powerful.
Application Image	A vivid description of how a biblical truth applies to specific, modern-day situations, helping listeners "see" the truth in action.
Cold Open	An introduction technique where the preacher jumps directly into a scene of the story to create immediate interest before providing context.
Concrete Words	Specific, sensory-based language (e.g., "boulder" instead of "big rock") that creates clear pictures in the listener's mind.
Deadeners	Passive verbs and phrases that bog down a story and drain it of its energy.
Explanatory Image	A storytelling technique that incorporates historical or cultural background information directly into the narrative rather than presenting it as a dry lecture.
Internalization	The process of becoming so familiar with a sermon manuscript that the preacher can deliver it with specific phrasing without needing to memorize it or read it.
Oral Style	A way of writing that mimics natural speech, often including incomplete sentences and informal language, designed to be heard rather than read.
Passive Voice	A grammatical construction where the subject receives the action (e.g., "was struck"); identified as a "deadener" in sermon manuscripts.
Sermon Manuscript	A word-for-word written version of a sermon used as a tool for thinking, refining word choice, and planning the "flesh" of the sermon skeleton.
Tov	The Hebrew word for "good," frequently used in the Old Testament; an example of the "spare, lean style" of biblical authors.