

## Preaching Narratives

### I. Advantages: Why Preach Narrative?

- A. God likes stories. He must since Scripture has so many stories! In fact, the Bible is narrative more than any other genre. If you don't learn how to preach stories now then you shut out the most common genre God has chosen. God must have thought narrative communicates well—otherwise He wouldn't have given us so many stories in His Word.
- B. People like stories. Stories hit our imaginations. People listen to stories. Just watch any audience lift their heads (or wake up!) as soon as the speaker begins to tell a story.
- C. Stories speak to the heart. Didactic truths touch the mind, but we must speak to the emotions and will of our audiences as well. Stories address the whole person: mind, will, and emotions. A story was how Nathan got inside David's skin (2 Sam. 12).
- D. See also Reed on page 121 for biblical reasons and examples for narrative preaching.

### II. Challenges: Difficulties We Face in Preaching Narrative

- A. *Didactic vs. Narrative:* Note the obstacles we face by contrasting didactic and narrative sermons:

	<i>Didactic</i>	<i>Narrative</i>
Literary Types	Laws, prophetic oracles, poetry, letters, apocalyptic	Stories, parables
Interpretation	Easier	More Difficult
Persons Involved	Generally 2: author & recipients	Generally more than 2: author, recipients, main character, supporting characters
Purpose of the Text	Stated	Implied
Passage Length	Generally Shorter	Generally Longer
Scripture Addressed	OT Poetic & Prophetic Books, Epistles (Romans to Revelation)	OT Historical Books (Genesis to Nehemiah), Gospels & Acts
Audience Interest	Lower	Higher
Application Temptation	To Generalize	To Moralize

B. *Levels of Meaning*: Another challenge relating to narrative preaching concerns the “level” in the text in which the preacher should communicate.

1. Statement of the View: Fee and Stuart (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 74), teach three different levels in each biblical story which I have adapted into this chart:

Top	Middle	Bottom
Universal	Israel	Individual
Theocentric	Corporate	Moral
Creation Fall of humanity Power of sin Need for redemption Christ’s incarnation Christ’s sacrifice	Call of Abraham Abrahamic lineage Slavery in Egypt Exodus Conquest National sin & disloyalty God’s patient protection Fall of Israel Fall of Judah Exile Restoration	Joseph sold into slavery Gideon’s doubts & fleece David’s adultery w/ Bathsheba  Plus hundreds of other individual narratives

2. Evaluation: There is no question that God works His divine purposes on the universal, national, and individual levels. But this theory raises some difficult questions:
  - a. “At *which* of these levels should the narrative preacher focus?”
  - b. “Should one preach at the *same* level in each sermon in a series or *vary* the levels?”
  - c. “If the same level is maintained, won’t this have problems?” Each message cannot be about God’s sovereignty to establish His kingdom (universal level), or His work with Israel (nationalistic level), or simply about individualistic morals (practical Christian living) divorced from God’s great plan.
  - d. “If the levels are varied in a series, what criteria should tell the preacher the right level for each sermon? the congregation? intuition? cues from the text? the toss of a coin?”
  - e. “At the individual level, can we always tell whether the main character is a good or a bad example?” Consider Abigail’s behaviour towards David by appeasing his anger against her tyrant husband Nabal (1 Sam. 25). Is she a good example of a wise wife or a bad example of a wife who ignores her husband’s authority? The text does not say.
3. These questions do not have easy answers. As an example of the perplexities involved, consider the choice of possible main ideas regarding the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen. 37). What is the lesson?
  - a. Universalistic? “God sovereignly prepares us as instruments to redeem His people”
  - b. Nationalistic? “Israel (or the church?) should not take the place of God during trials”
  - c. Individual? “Telling others our arrogant dreams can get us into a heap of trouble”

Notice how the focus here changes from being on God to the community to the individual. Later in this study we will see how to solve this seeming conflict of ideas.

- C. *The Uniqueness of Old Testament Narrative*: Fee and Stuart elaborate on this by describing what OT narratives are *not* (pp. 75-77). These four observations may have some application to NT narrative as well (Gospels and Acts):
1. “OT narratives are not just stories about people who lived in OT times. They are first and foremost stories about what *God* did to and through these people...God is the hero of the story.”
  2. “OT narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings. But... the ways that God works... are not always comprehensible to us.”
  3. “OT narratives do not always teach directly. They emphasize God’s nature and revelation in special ways that legal or doctrinal portions of the Bible never can, by allowing us vicariously to live through events and experiences rather than simply learning *about* the issues involved in those events and experiences.”
  4. “Each individual narrative or episode within a narrative does not necessarily have a moral all its own... In this way, narratives are analogous to parables... in that the whole unit gives the message, not the separate individual parts.”
- D. The preceding discussion may seem to indicate there are more obstacles than blessings in narrative preaching. This gives you two choices:
1. Don’t preach narrative due to the higher risk of misinterpreting the text or the extra time needed.
  2. Pray that God will give you the understanding needed then proceed with caution to the steps below. (Please pick this choice!)

### III. Methodology: How to Preach Narratives

- A. We have already applied “Seven Steps to Preach Expository Sermons” (pp. 27-28) to the epistles.
- B. Now let’s apply these same steps to narrative preaching. Much will be the same, so the following highlights only where understanding and communicating stories is different *from didactic literature*:
1. Study:
    - a. *Passage*: Choose one which is a literary unit, which generally means you must cover more text than in didactic literature. It is generally difficult to preach 1-2 chapters in the epistles in a single sermon, but this is very common in story-telling.
    - b. *Exegesis*: Follow the principles discussed in Reed’s article (pp. 121-29), especially:
      - 1) Biblical narratives have a unity of author (God) so they revolve around a central theme. Look for the individual contribution to this theme in your passage.
        - a) The Bible is summed up as “God glorifies Himself by restoring His kingdom to Himself.” Restated: Every episode in Scripture in some sense (big or small) contributes to the Lord bringing creation (His kingdom) back into harmony with Him for His own honor (p. 122). Here’s my plug for preaching primarily at the “top level.” We definitely need more theocentric preaching!
        - b) Good narrative preaching recognizes this central (vertical) theme of Scripture and therefore does not simply treat texts as moral lessons for life (a horizontal perspective). See pages 142-47 for further explanations here by Greidanus.
      - 2) Study the setting, characters, and plot (see pp. 122-23 details).
    - c. Keep in mind these *ten principles for interpreting narratives* (Fee & Stuart, 78):

- 1) An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.
  - 2) An OT narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.
  - 3) Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen. Therefore, not every narrative has an identifiable moral of the story.
  - 4) People in stories are not always good examples for us. They often are bad examples.
  - 5) Most characters in OT narratives are far from perfect and their actions are, too.
  - 6) We are not always told at the end of the narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge that on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically already in the Scripture.
  - 7) *All* narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given (cf. John 21:25). What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.
  - 8) Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere, in other ways.
  - 9) Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without stating it).
  - 10) In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives.
2. Structure: Look for the major movements in the story and make each a Main Point.
  3. CPT: It is more difficult to discern the exegetical idea in narratives, so extra care must be shown to assure it is in line with authorial intent (cf. 116, 141-47). See, for example, how both Genesis 23 and 38 contribute to the argument of the book.
    - a. Sometimes the author plainly states the exegetical idea of his stories (e.g., John 20:30-31). However, this is rare. For example, in John's next section (John 21:1-14) Jesus appears to the disciples on the Sea of Galilee. The intent of this story has few, if any clues in the text, making its meaning difficult to discern.
    - b. Refer to Reed's other clues to meaning on pages 125-27 (particularly final stress, allusions, synthetic design, and questions to ask regarding the passage).
  4. Sermon's Purpose: The three developmental questions are the same as for didactic literature. They require us to explain, prove, or apply the text.
    - a. "What does the (exegetical) idea mean?" If your EI needs explanation, rework it and make it more understandable. In narrative, this probably won't be your emphasis in most cases.
    - b. "Is it true?" Sometimes it is necessary to *prove* that your interpretation of the text is accurate (e.g., that Jonah really was swallowed by a large fish, that the days of Genesis are literal days, that creation is more feasible than evolution, etc.).
    - c. "What does it mean to me?" Most often this third issue (*application*) will be the developmental emphasis.
- \* Reed's study (p. 129) places this step on sermon purpose *after* the homiletical idea rather than before it. He says that these three questions relate to the sermon idea rather than the exegetical idea, but actually they come into play to *determine* the sermon idea (and thus chronologically come before it). In actual practice, it is difficult to follow these steps in precise order due to

natural overlapping of your understanding in the study process. Sometimes in sermon preparation the steps do not follow in exact order.

5. CPS or Homiletical Idea (Main Idea, or MI): With a little background, people can understand the details and even the exegetical idea of biblical stories, but your challenge is to show how the story relates to them. This sounds easy but then becomes a challenge in cases where obedience means killing someone (e.g., annihilating the Amalekites)! How can an accurate but relevant sermon idea be obtained from narrative texts?
  - a. The MI must flow from an understanding of the EI. How would the first readers have understood the message of the passage? Reed (p. 128) elaborates on this.
  - b. Generally you will need to find a common principle between the biblical times and modern times. For example, David showed faith in God by *killing* Goliath but our faith is shown in *saving* lives or trusting God amidst obstacles; yet the common element is faith, so this should be seen in your MI.
6. Structure: Outline the Sermon.
  - a. Use one of the structures suggested by Reed (pp. 120, 129-34). In particular, you may want to emphasize the inductive format as this is the form used by most narratives. In other words, most Bible stories do not give the point of the story *first* and *then* tell the story. Rather, the point of the story unfolds later as the story is told (inductive design).
  - b. When preaching through a narrative series, vary the structure so all your narrative messages don't sound alike. Some samples:

Structure	Passage	Title & Pages in These Notes
Simple Inductive, Cyclical Inductive, & Simple Deductive	Acts 6:1-6	"Solving Problems in a Growing Church" (pp. 49-50)
Simple Inductive	Judges 1:8-15	"The God of Extra Delights" (pp. 52-53)
Simple Inductive	Ezra 9	"My Family is My God's Business" (pp. 174, 178)
Cyclical Inductive	Nehemiah 1—2	"Where God Guides, God Provides" (pp. 115-16)
Cyclical Inductive	John 13:1-17	"Dirty Saints" (pp. 148-53)

- c. *Oral Clarity*: Narrative preaching seems to allow for the ability to move around the stage more than didactic messages—especially if the narrative is done as a monologue.
  - 1) Planning your movements in advance can be a great aid to clarity. Grant and Reed's instructions on stage movement reproduced on pages 113-14 are very helpful.
  - 2) Another example of movement is the series of "Xs" and "Os" in the left hand column of the Ezra monologue (pp. 170ff.). These indicate stage movements, the "X" designating where I stood in relation to the audience (which was seated above the "Xs" and "Os"). My first place to speak was centre stage up front. Then during the background section of the monologue I moved to my left and back, etc.
  - 3) The above is applied to monologues, but the same works well in normal preaching of narrative passages. In fact, get a clip on microphone and move around (with purpose) in *all* your sermons! Here's a great advantages of preaching without notes since you need not be tied to the pulpit.

- d. *Introduction and Conclusion*: Differences between beginning and ending narrative and didactic preaching are not significant. However, an introduction to a message that starts directly with a story is more acceptable and interesting than starting with propositions. Many “ho hums” (attention grabbers) at the start of a sermon are stories anyway. If the biblical story can be told in an interesting way, this can be an effective way to begin. See my summary of Reed’s sample structures (p. 120) for details on introductions and conclusions.

7. Preach:

- a. Practice your delivery without notes, using the same guidelines as page 80.
- b. An often-asked question from my students is: “How do I tell stories?” At first I thought this a rather odd question since we all tell stories all the time. “Sure we all know how to do this!” I reasoned. But after hearing a few hundred stories in the classroom I finally caught on that this is very much a lost art. Perhaps these tips will help:
  - 1) The best source I know is Grant and Reed, *Telling Stories to Touch the Heart*. This practical guide assumes no storytelling experience and gives a very detailed, step-by-step method.
  - 2) Good storytelling begins with good public reading, so practice reading out loud, especially to children (cf. p. 9).
  - 3) The way you introduce your story can make or break it.
    - a) Always tell stories inductively. In other words, never give the lesson up front. A student once began with a statement like, “I want to tell you a story about a friend of mine who died and taught me trust in God.” The story that followed had no suspense since we all knew that her friend was going to die in the end!
    - b) Don’t tell us that you are going to tell us a story—just tell it! Since people love (well told) stories, your first few words will perk their interest sufficiently without any announcement.
  - 4) Practice movement when you practice your message.
  - 5) Follow the guidelines regarding the “window” on page 8.
  - 6) Never read a story from an illustration card. Reading quotes is fine but reading takes the life out of a story.

## Focusing Your Narrative Idea on Authorial Intent

### An Example from Nehemiah 1—2

#### A Different Approach

Nearly all evangelical commentaries expound the Book of Nehemiah as if it's a manual on effective leadership (see Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehemiah," *EBC*, 4:591; Donald K. Campbell, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge*, 23; Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick: A Study in Nehemiah*; Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," *BKC*, 1:673-74). I think this emphasis has problems:

1. It is highly questionable that the authorial intent of the Book of Nehemiah is to train readers as better leaders. I feel that it is unlikely that the first readers saw the primary purpose of the book as holding up the man Nehemiah as a model to follow.
2. This perspective places undue attention to the human instrument, Nehemiah himself, rather than on the God who sovereignly led him to accomplish the task (1:5, 9-11; 2:4b, 8b, 12, 18, 20).
3. It puts the stress on *how* the walls of Jerusalem were raised which is but a minor focus. The real emphasis should be *why* the walls needed to be rebuilt (2:17).
4. Ezra and Nehemiah in the Hebrew Bible constitute one book and therefore should share a common theme. Since Ezra is not a manual on leadership then this should not be expected of Nehemiah as well.
5. This view also limits proper application only to those in leadership positions.
6. The leadership view hardly takes into account the historical background and chronology. A careful evaluation of the historical situation and how the book fits into the total plan of God brings the Lord to center-stage as the sovereign, covenant-keeping God (see below).

#### Exegetical Outline

##### Prologue

*Historical background:* About 1500 years earlier God had promised Abraham that He would make his descendants into a great nation possessing the entire land from the River of Egypt to the Euphrates (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18f.). Hundreds of years later God further spoke through Isaiah and many other prophets that a Davidic king called the Messiah would rule Israel in this geographical domain. However, the nation rebelled against the Lord and went into exile as the Law had warned (Deut. 28). The key question in the minds of the exiled Jews was whether God would still fulfill His promise of a new nation in the land of Israel under the Messiah as ruler. Was He still sovereign even though His people were in such distress?

*Historical foreground:* No doubt people wondered how a Messiah could be offered to the nation if Israel was still in exile. For example, one of the messianic prophecies stated that He would be born in Bethlehem (cf. Micah 5:2, written nearly 200 years earlier). Surely the nation would have to somehow return to its homeland for the Messiah to offer the kingdom—an offer that indeed did occur under Christ (Matt. 10:7) but was rejected. Furthermore, Daniel had recorded only a few years earlier that Artaxerxes' command to rebuild Jerusalem under Nehemiah (444 BC) would begin "seventy sevens" (490 years) of prophetic years in the nation's history (Dan. 9:25). The 69th prophetic year (483rd year) would culminate in the death of Messiah in AD 33 (Dan. 9:26).

The postexilic era testifies to the gracious hand of a sovereign God who had not forgotten His promises, for under Zerubbabel and Ezra a small remnant had returned from Babylon, rebuilt the temple and begun reforms. The building under Nehemiah completes this record with a direct fulfillment of Daniel 9:25. Thus, the account of Ezra-Nehemiah shows that God is indeed the God over all gods (Ezra 1:2), a covenant-keeping God. Likewise, His people need to keep the covenant as well (Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:590).

Exegetical Idea: The means by which God sovereignly fulfills His promise to preserve Israel in a restored Jerusalem was through preparing Nehemiah to rebuild the city wall.

- I. (Ch. 1) The means by which the sovereign God (“God of heaven,” vv. 4, 5) prepared to restore the covenant city of Jerusalem was by placing on Nehemiah both the burden and position to be used of God.
  - A. (1:1-3) God informed Nehemiah that the covenantal people and city were in shame.
  - B. (1:4-11a) God gave Nehemiah ability to see Israel’s sin and His promises and to restore the nation.
  - C. (1:11b) God put Nehemiah in a prominent position to restore Jerusalem to the stature befitting Jerusalem as the city inhabited by the sovereign Lord.
- II. (2:1-8) The means by which the sovereign God prepared to restore Jerusalem was through granting Nehemiah’s requests before King Artaxerxes.
- III. (2:9-20) The means by which the sovereign God prepared to restore Jerusalem was by granting Nehemiah the needed respect after inspecting the walls despite opposition from Gentiles.
  - A. (2:9-10) God granted Nehemiah honor before the Persian officials over the opposition.
  - B. (2:11-16) God granted Nehemiah honor before the people by being informed of the task.
  - C. (2:17-20) God granted Nehemiah honor before the people by reminding them that God was surely in their work despite opposition.

**Homiletical Exposition** (cyclical inductive form) Title: “Where God Guides, God Provides”

Introduction:

1. Sometimes it seems like things happen without any divine purpose to it all (examples).
  2. How we can know that God wills for us to accomplish a certain task (subject)?
  3. While Israel was in Babylon things looked hopeless—could the nation be restored? The Book of Ezra records a partial restoration, but the city walls were still destroyed. Was God still with *them* and still sovereign? And how can *we* be reminded that God is really sovereign (subject restated)?
- I. God sovereignly *provides both the vision and ability* to do certain ministries.
    - A. God gave Nehemiah both the burden and position to be used in rebuilding the wall (ch. 1).
    - B. God gives us vision and strategic positions to serve Him when we are obedient.
  - II. God sovereignly *prepares other key people* as resources to help His people do His tasks.
    - A. God granted Nehemiah’s requests before King Artaxerxes (2:1-8).
    - B. God prepares the hearts of others to enable us to do His will too.
  - III. God sovereignly *helps His people gain the respect needed* to accomplish His tasks.
    - A. God honored Nehemiah among the people despite opposition after he inspected the walls (2:9-20).
    - B. God gives us the credibility needed to do His will.

Main Idea: God sovereignly gives us the needed vision, resources, and credibility to do His tasks.

Restatements: Where God guides, God provides! He always equips us to accomplish His will.

Application: What vision, place of influence, resources, and credibility has He given *you*?