



# 5 Tell Me the Old, Old Story

Preparing to Preach Old Testament Narratives

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The Holy Spirit has chosen to fill the Bible with stories, and so the preacher wanting to preach the whole counsel of God will need to work out how to preach stories sooner rather than later. As the Scriptures tell us, the stories of the Old Testament are written down for our instruction (1 Cor. 10:1-11), and are profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Yet at the same time, the central focus of the whole Old Testament is the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow (Luke 24:44-47). Thus my goal in preaching Old Testament narratives is to show people the glory of the gospel in the sufferings and resurrection of Christ, in a way that instructs and trains them in righteousness, while at the same time constantly returning their eyes to Christ, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2).

I have an unusual calling: I am a bi-vocational church planter in a church with multiple part-time staff. We presently have two half-time pastors, including myself, a part-time intern who oversees our music ministry, and a part-time staff member who prepares our order of service. I work full-time for a Christian college and I currently preach around 40 per cent of the Sundays, which means that my schedule for preparation doesn't necessarily look like that of the more normal full-time solo pastor, who preaches 90 per cent of the Sundays, perhaps twice

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each Sunday, and may have a midweek Bible Study as well. Yet I will try to focus on what is universal in the preparation process.

### Select the Text

The process of selecting a text is usually fairly straightforward for me, since we follow the practice of preaching consecutively through Biblical books. The advantages of this approach are many, especially when it comes to narratives. It enables the members of our church to grasp the connection between each story and its wider context in the Biblical book, without having to build all of those connections from scratch in each sermon. For example, the story of David and Goliath does not occur in a vacuum in 1 Samuel 17. It connects back to the previous chapter in which the Lord chose David to be Israel's future king over his taller brothers because God looks on the heart, not on outward appearance (1 Sam. 16:7). It also connects back to Israel's desire for a king who would go out in front of them and fight their battles for them in 1 Samuel 8:20. Situations like this were supposedly why Israel needed a king in the first place. Preaching a whole book helps the congregation (and preacher) to get the bigger picture and therefore see more clearly the themes that are important to the author of the text.

Occasionally, we will do a more selective overview series, but usually we cover every single narrative in a Biblical book. This forces me to wrestle with hard texts that I would otherwise skip. For example, in my series on the book of Numbers, I was faced with preaching on Numbers 33, which is a travel itinerary listing the various places Israel camped on their journey through the wilderness. If I had been preparing a twelve-week series on Numbers, I would certainly have skipped it. Yet as I prepared to preach it, I realized that the list of place names and events that Moses was instructed to write down (by the Lord!) actually had a profound purpose in shaping Israel's thinking about the wilderness experience, a purpose that resonates with our own wilderness journeys through this world.<sup>1</sup> In God's providence,

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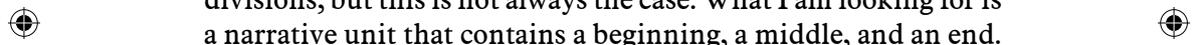
1. See "Pilgrim People" in Iain Duguid, *Numbers*. Preach the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), pp. 345-54. The audio version is available at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/resources/a/Pilgrim-People>.



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the most unlikely text became the basis for one of the most helpful and memorable sermons in the entire series. Indeed, even when that is not the case, I would argue that these “hard passages” are often the texts that our people need the most help to understand, and we shirk our calling as preachers if we dodge them.

On the other hand, we also need to feed our people a balanced diet from God’s Word. While I preached through the book of Numbers for eighteen months, my co-pastor was preaching from the New Testament in roughly equal amounts. At other times, we have chosen to preach through shorter sections of a long book and then shift to a series from a different book and different genre before returning to the next section (for example, preaching the Abraham stories from Genesis, then preaching a section from Ephesians before returning to Isaac and Jacob).



Even when preaching continuously through books, though, I still need to decide what constitutes the narrative unit. In many cases, the Biblical chapter divisions match up with literary divisions, but this is not always the case. What I am looking for is a narrative unit that contains a beginning, a middle, and an end. A complete narrative unit typically starts with an exposition that sets the scene for the story, followed by a series of episodes with increasing narrative tension in which the events play themselves out, and then a final resolution. Taking a shorter section as your preaching unit can easily lead to missing the main point of the story and preaching about something that is incidental rather than central to its purpose.

In the Old Testament, that typically leads to long preaching texts. For example, the story of David and Goliath is 58 verses long. In many of our churches people are not used to having such long readings from Scripture, yet since this is indeed the Word of God should we not be seeking to encourage people to develop an appetite for more of it? I therefore never apologize for a long Scripture reading, though I do take account of it in setting the boundaries of how long I can preach. I don’t want to exhaust the patience of young or weak sheep. I also always read my own Scripture passage at the beginning of the sermon because I believe that that is, in a profound sense, the beginning of teaching the story. Since I have been living with this story for

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a week, often I can read it in a way that highlights important aspects and themes.

### Understand the Text

Having decided the parameters of my text, I now need to grasp the structure, flow and details of the passage. To do this, I generally begin by reading the passage in the Hebrew. This is not easy for most preachers given the length of the passage and the fact that many pastors do not have a strong background in the original languages. Yet I would encourage you to do the best you can with what you have, using all of the helps that are available to you. Many computer programs will help you look up vocabulary in a lexicon and parse difficult verbs simply by pointing a mouse, and it is not “cheating” if you need to do this.

If you don’t read Hebrew, read the narrative several times slowly in several different English translations, including a more word for word translation like the NASB and a more dynamically equivalent translation like the NIV or the NLT. My goal at this stage is to start to soak in the story and develop a close familiarity with it. In fact, every morning before I start work on my sermon, I usually read the whole story again. There is no substitute for knowing the text well.

While I am reading, I am looking for unusual or repeated words, or for phrases that may suggest things that are being emphasized by the narrator. For example, why is Sarah’s maidservant Hagar so often called “Hagar the Egyptian”?<sup>2</sup> Words that are repeated frequently in the original will not always be repeated in an English translation, however. In the book of Jonah, for example, the Hebrew word *ra’* in different contexts is variously translated as *evil, harm, displeasing, angry*. Reading from a translation may not pick up all of these connections, though some will still be there.

I also look for any programmatic sounding statements that may give a clue to the purpose of the narrative. For example, Joseph’s statement to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil

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2. For my answer, see “Hagar the Egyptian. A Note on the Allure of Egypt in the Abraham Cycle”, *WTJ* 56 (1994): 419-21. This article stemmed from an observation made while preparing to preach.

against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20), clearly describes an important point being made in the narrative, as does Jonah’s declaration “Salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9, KJV). In addition, I’ll make notes about anything that seems out of place or irrelevant. Nothing in the Bible is irrelevant, of course, but sometimes there are seemingly odd details. I can’t always figure out why they are there, but if I can explain why the narrator has chosen to include these details, I am probably getting close to understanding his goals.

Next, I try to break the narrative down into individual scenes. Scenes are typically defined by location, time, or the characters taking part. When one of these elements changes, so also does the scene. Often the paragraph breaks in the English Bible will give basic clues to scene changes. Again, looking at several English translations will help me see where there is general agreement that there is a break and where there may be a division of opinion about which verses are most closely connected together. Having identified the scenes, I will often try to summarize the function of each scene individually to build up a composite picture of the flow of the narrative plot. Again, this forces me to wrestle with the details of the text, not just the big picture.

Sometimes a narrative has a chiastic structure which invites the reader to look for the event or events that provide the turning point. The book of Esther has a strongly marked chiastic structure which highlights the key turning point in the fortunes of the Jews—not Esther’s decision to appear before the king in chapter 4 but rather King Ahasuerus’ sleepless night in 6:1. On that seemingly chance happening (and the subsequent series of “coincidences” that follow) hangs the fate of the entire people, whatever Esther does or does not decide to do.

At other times, there are scenes that are narratively unnecessary for telling the story. For example, in Judges 11, the story would flow smoothly from verse 29 into verse 32 if verses 30 and 31 (where Jephthah makes his vow) were omitted. In that way, the narrator is showing us how unnecessary (as well as how wrong) Jephthah’s vow was to winning the battle.

I also list out all the characters that are involved in the narrative, since stories generally work by inviting us to compare the characters and plot of the story with ourselves and the plot

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of our lives. With whom in the story do we naturally identify? Are there other characters in the story who are actually more like us? These identifications will tend to suggest potential avenues of application for the story. For example, if we identify with David in the story about his encounter with Goliath, the natural application will be about the need for us to have faith as we encounter the giants in our lives. Yet in reality, most of us are probably much more like Saul, hiding in our tents and shirking our calling to fight. Or perhaps we are like Eliab, David's older brother: we are not willing to fight ourselves but instead speak discouraging words to those who do have faith. Putting ourselves into the place of a variety of characters (including characters like the people of Israel as a whole) will suggest a variety of different ways in which the text may have been written down for our instruction (1 Cor. 10:11).

There may also be characters in the story that indicate ways of preaching this text to non-Christians who may be present. Where are the people in this story who look like my non-Christian neighbor or friend? If I am thoughtless about their presence in the congregation, I may preach David and Goliath in a way that presents the secular world like Goliath, an enemy to be slain! In some ways, of course, that would not be a false presentation of the text. Yet if I remember that I am preaching to some unbelievers, I might point out that this is not the only way in which Israel is called to interact with their unbelieving neighbors. There are also the models of outsiders like Rahab and Ruth, who repent and are incorporated into the covenant community by faith.

If we only find the connections between the characters and ourselves, however, our application will tend to be moralistic, treating the passage as if it were only law: "Don't be like Saul or Eliab. Dare to be a David." I am, therefore, always also looking for the line that goes from this passage to Christ. I want to show people how the plot of the story connects with the wider plot of the Biblical book, of the Old Testament, and with the grand narrative of Scripture that always finds its focus in the sufferings of Christ and the glories that will follow (Luke 24:44-47). In other words, how does this passage draw us to see more richly the gospel of Jesus?



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At this stage, it is sometimes helpful to ask what message the original hearers of the story would have heard. How would it have addressed them in their immediate circumstances and pointed them forward to their need of the Messiah? In the case of David and Goliath, the immediate issue was Israel's need for a king—and not just any king, but a king after God's own heart. Saul's role in the story is to fail and show Israel their need of David. But as the horizon widens to the whole of 1 and 2 Samuel, we see that even David, the king after God's own heart, was far from perfect. He committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed (2 Sam. 11). He did not manage his own family well, nor did he oversee his subordinates wisely. Second Samuel ends with his sinful census. And who will take his place after his death? Is he really the king that Israel needs?

Widening the horizon further to include the book of Judges and the books of 1 and 2 Kings, we see that these themes have a longer trajectory. Samson's calling was to “begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (Judg. 13:5), of whom Goliath is the classic example (he is called “The Philistine” in 1 Samuel 17:8). Yet Samson failed, instead doing what was right in his own eyes (notice the prevalence of sight as the source of Samson's problems). A key issue in the book of Judges is the absence of a king (17:6; 19:1; 21:25). Yet having a king does not prevent Israel from descending into chaos and apostasy once again. Indeed, the kings themselves often lead the people astray, and it is their sins that provide the catalyst for the exile, as the Book of Kings repeatedly makes clear. The first readers of the Book of Kings would have known that great though David was, he was not the answer to their problems.

Ultimately, the answer to Israel's need and ours comes in a new David, Jesus Christ, who comes to the battle line as humble and as unrecognized as David and conquers our true enemies (sin, Satan, and death) not by his skill with a sling, nor even by his willingness to risk his life by faith in the name of the Lord, but by actually laying down his life in our place. In Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd takes the place of His sheep. We have all often fallen short like Saul and Eliab, instead of stepping out in faith to serve God as David did. Even when we

have tried to do what is right, Eliab's words of critique may (in our case) actually be close to the mark: we are seeking the glory for ourselves rather than for the name of the Lord. Yet David's role in the story is to anticipate his greater son. Jesus doesn't just re-do what David did on a larger scale. He is not simply a clearer and better model. He has won the victory for us, in our place, as our covenant head. In the active obedience of Christ, God provides specific righteousness to cover our personal lack of faith and confidence in the Lord's power and might. Through His suffering and death, He atones for our specific failures in this area, as well as for the times when we have succeeded with deeply sinful motivations.

### **Use Good Resources**

At this point, I'm ready to turn to the commentaries. In some cases, I may already know in a fair amount of detail what the text is about, with some clear ideas about application and how the passage points to Christ. At other times, I'm still completely in the dark at this point. I've also discovered that different preachers use widely ranging numbers of resources. I know some pastors who use a dozen or more commentaries each week in studying every passage. I don't personally find that profitable, since after the first three or four the amount of benefit gained typically drops off sharply. For any sermon series, I usually try to find four different commentaries that will become my main resources, though if there are particular questions that a passage raises, I may search through a few more for specific answers.

Of those four commentaries, I try to make one a literary analysis of the narrative. Even if not written by a Christian, a good literary analysis (such as the works of Jan Fokkelman) will bring out the themes and structure of a story and its connections with other stories in ways that can be enormously illuminating. Unfortunately, such academic works can be very expensive, so if you have a local college or seminary library or access to interlibrary loans it will be helpful. In some cases, books.google.com or the "search inside" feature at Amazon.com can provide enough access to decide whether it is worth paying for the book. I will often choose to read a commentary by a Jewish scholar as well, especially for the Pentateuch. Their insight into

rabbinic discussion of texts can be very helpful, for example, in discovering why particular laws are inserted in connection with particular narratives. Traditional academic commentaries like the New International Commentary on the Old Testament are often useful to answer specific background questions. I don't generally find much profit in devotional commentaries, as they are usually not grounded sufficiently in a good understanding of the text. However, works by pastor-scholars like Ralph Davis (*Focus on the Bible*) and Philip Ryken (*Reformed Expository Commentary*) are very helpful.

### **Start writing**

I can research a passage forever. It's much easier than the hard work of writing, so I have to discipline myself to sit in front of my computer and get to work. Sometimes I sit down and the sermon seems to write itself. At other times, I spend a lot of time staring at a blank screen. Occasionally, I even remember that I ought to pray! God often uses the process of writing to humble me and remind me that producing a sermon is not a matter under my control. He has never yet left me with nothing to say on Sunday, though there have been a few Saturdays when I have tossed out everything (apart from the research) and started from scratch.

In general, when I hit a block, I try to keep on writing something, even if I know that it isn't any good. Often the next day when I come back to it and ask the question, "Why isn't this any good?" the answer points me in the direction of what "good" looks like. In any event, I try to start writing early in the week, since I firmly believe that the art of writing is rewriting. If I start writing on Tuesday, I have several days in which to come back fresh, look over what I have already and try to develop it further. Given my teaching load, Fridays often end up as my main writing day. However, by that point I have been working with the text all week, so there have been plenty of opportunities in the course of life to think about connections between the passage and my life.

Traditional homiletics books tend to stress a deductive approach to sermon structure, in which the unity of the sermon comes from a structure that is to some degree imposed on the text. Often, the preacher starts out with a thesis statement and

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gives his points at the outset. This approach generally works well for Pauline epistles, where there is a clear flow to Paul's arguments, and many of my favorite preachers follow the same approach when it comes to narratives. It makes for a clear, simple outline and at its best can really unpack the points that the Biblical storyteller is making.

At other times, however, an approach that restructures the complexity of the narrative into three simple, connected points moves the sermon too far away from the text itself, flattening out the fine detail of the story. Particularly with narratives, therefore, I often prefer to adopt a more inductive approach where I walk the congregation through the story, examining all of its details like the facets of a jewel. Application may be scattered throughout the sermon or gathered together at the end, once we have a really rich appreciation of the narrative. Something is lost in the unity of the sermon, perhaps, but I think that something is gained in appreciating the nuances of the text. I think that this inductive approach also trains my congregation over the course of time how to read a Biblical story and how application (including gospel-centered application) flows from the story in a way that a more deductive approach sometimes may not make so clear. Like life, stories are complex and can have many applications.

I always begin my sermon by writing the introduction. I know that many homiletics advocates advocate writing the introduction at the end, when you actually know where the sermon is going, but my linear-thinking mind can't cope with that. I have to start at the beginning, even if I am aware that I may have to come back at the end and make sure that the introduction still matches where the sermon ended up going.

I always write a full manuscript of my sermon. Writing a full manuscript forces me to think through not only what I want to say but how exactly I am going to say it. It allows me to polish each phrase and sentence so that it has exactly the right wording, and to work on precise and effective transitions. It also means that if I ever come back to preach the sermon again, I have a complete understanding of what I said. I know some preachers who will never preach the same sermon twice. I don't understand that concern: if it was worth preaching once, it is worth preaching again, while if it wasn't worth preaching in the

first place, it is time to repent and try to do better. I try to write in oral style, in the way I will deliver it, not in written style as if for a book. I don't worry too much about details when I am first writing, though, because I know I will be going back through it again (and again). Initially, what I am seeking to get down is a coherent flow of thought. My goal is to have a complete and polished manuscript by the end of Friday, in a form that I can then show my wife (see below).

I don't take a full manuscript with me into the pulpit. I think that if I did, I would find it too easy to be tied to my manuscript and lose eye contact with people. On the other hand, given my bi-vocational schedule, I don't have time to memorize the entire sermon and deliver it without notes. I can see the significant advantage of preaching without notes for those who preach to large congregations of skeptics, or where there are always many visitors. Preaching without notes gives great directness and is very engaging. Yet in my context, where most of the people know me and are already to some degree engaged with the sermon, I find that it works well enough for me to have an abbreviated version of the manuscript with which I am very familiar. This reduced manuscript consists of half sentences and single words that act as memory triggers. Illustrations, for the most part, can be identified by a single word, while important phrases and transitions are retained in more precise form. The result is something that probably no one apart from me could decipher but it enables me to know exactly where I am and where I am going.

### **Practice delivery**

Once I have my reduced manuscript, I work from it a couple of times until I am completely familiar with it (normally on Saturday and early Sunday morning). When I started out as a preacher, I would actually do this out loud so that I could figure out appropriate inflections. Now I am able to do it entirely in my head, which helps me not to disturb sleeping family members. At this stage, I am often still adding illustrations and application points as they occur to me.

Typically, this is also the point where I get input from my wife. I am blessed to have a wife who has enormous wisdom



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and theological acumen, combined with great people skills and sensitivity. As a result, I ask her to read the manuscript of my sermon each week, usually on Friday. This is an exercise in humility as the sermon is rarely finished at that point. My pride would always like to wait until it is in better shape before giving it to her; however, I have learned that it is far more helpful to have her input, positive or critical. She helps me in a variety of ways. Sometimes she will flag a sentence or thought that would be unnecessarily offensive to people in a particular situation. Often, she will suggest a possible line of application. She will frequently ask “How have you failed in this area? Can you give an example?”, encouraging me to be open about the specifics of my own sin and failure. Sometimes she will suggest appropriate lines of connection to Christ. Not every ministry wife has the time or gifts to help in this way, but it is a tremendous asset to my preaching. If your wife is not able to do this, you may be able to find another pastor, an elder, or a gifted layman who can fill this role for you.



### **Deliver the Sermon**

Not much needs to be said here.



### **Debrief**

In my early ministry, I pastored a church plant in an area of low-cost, government subsidized housing in England. Our most fruitful ministry was with 7-11 year old street kids. As a result, about half of our small congregation was made up of 7-11 year olds who attended our service, ate lunch with us, and then hung around for our afternoon children’s program. It was a fabulous apprenticeship in learning how to preach profound truth simply. To keep the kids engaged, I produced a children’s sheet each week to go along with the sermon, with questions for them to respond to and spaces for them to draw their own picture. After church, I would often go around and see what the kids had drawn. It was a great (and often humbling) way to find out what they thought my sermon had been about.

In the same way, the time after church provides an opportunity for us to find out what people are hearing in our sermons. It is also often a time when we are physically and emotionally drained,





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so it is not the time for detailed critical analysis of the sermon's strengths and weaknesses. However, if someone says "That was a great sermon", it can be a good idea to ask what they found helpful. Track down some kids and teenagers and ask them what they learned. As you build up an inventory of answers over time, you will get a sense of what it is that people are hearing clearly and also, perhaps, what they are missing.

This can usefully be combined with more formal or informal feedback mechanisms. It can be difficult to hear people point out our weaknesses and flaws. We would rather that they only told us our strengths. Yet I need to remember that if this is what my friends are thinking about my preaching, there are probably other people in the congregation who are thinking it less charitably! There may be bad habits that can be corrected or other areas to work on that will help the gospel to shine more clearly in my preaching. Why wouldn't I want to do everything in my power to pursue that goal?

### *Suggested resources for further reading:*

Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Fresh: How to Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Tain, UK: Christian Focus Publications: Mentor, 2006).

Jan Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).