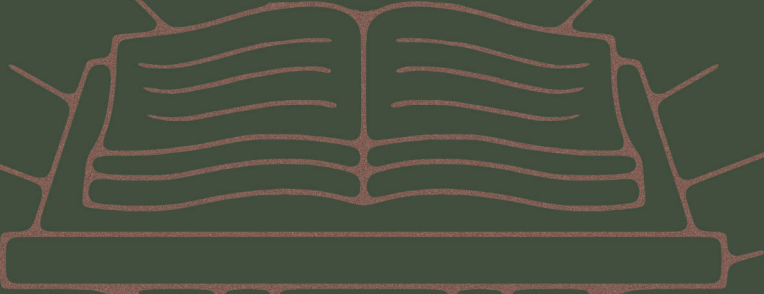


Douglas Sean O'Donnell
& Leland Ryken



THE
BEAUTY & POWER
OF
BIBLICAL
EXPOSITION

PREACHING THE LITERARY
ARTISTRY & GENRES OF THE BIBLE

“This book is a sumptuous feast for preachers which, if savored and digested, will prepare a banquet of life for those who listen to it. It is a delight to read from beginning to end. Formed by a deep love of the Bible and for the God who gave it, O’Donnell and Ryken have given us a wonderful gift. Whether you are a novice preacher who wishes to have your mistakes corrected gently but wisely, a tired preacher who has lost the romance of the art form, a burdened preacher who is taking shortcuts because of the demands of ministry, or an experienced preacher for whom well-worn homiletical paths have become second nature, there is something here to edify you richly. This book will make you smile and provide fresh enchantment with the text of holy Scripture. Read and enjoy!”

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“With masterful and inspirational challenges to preachers, O’Donnell combines his and Ryken’s years of biblical preaching insights into a descriptive and useful manual for biblical exposition. This work, with its relevant examples, encourages preachers to read the Bible through the lens of various literary genres of Scripture while faithfully preaching the word of God with authorial intent and transformative purpose.”

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“As Virgil once stood before Dante, this volume now stands before you as a wise tour guide of the contours and depths and great beauty of the Bible’s literary genres. Preachers will benefit from numerous insights packed into each chapter (as will their congregations), and all readers will have their appreciation of the Scriptures enriched by the obvious affection that O’Donnell and Ryken have for God’s word. Let this book encourage you in your word work.”

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“Preaching faithfully and well is the challenge of a lifetime. We need all the help we can get. There is much wisdom here, the fruit of long experience and careful study, all compiled with warmth and clarity. This book will be a helpful resource for preachers and for those who seek to train preachers.”

Christopher Ash, Writer in Residence, Tyndale House; author,
The Priority of Preaching

“Leland Ryken has been perhaps the clearest and most helpful voice in understanding the literature of the Bible for our generation, and here Douglas O’Donnell ably brings Ryken’s insight and voice specifically to the preaching task. The strength of this book lies especially in its affirmation of the importance of paying attention to the function and beauty of literary form, but also in its setting forth of particular strategies for reading and for preaching, helpfully illustrated through particular examples. Clearly, literary form matters to God; and as preachers, it should matter to us, in both our preparation and our delivery. *The Beauty and Power of Biblical Exposition* will serve you well on both fronts. It is a compelling testimony to the power and profitability of God’s beautiful word.”

Mike Bullmore, Senior Pastor, CrossWay Community Church,
Bristol, Wisconsin

“One of the great needs of our day is for pulpits to be manned by preachers who are committed to proclaiming the truth of Scripture and equipped to sound the beauty of the gospel. This work has drawn its bow toward a worthy and unmoving target. These two men have each been shaping voices in my life as a preacher and a hymnwriter, and I am expectant to see how the Lord will use this contribution to mold the next generation of expositors.”

Matt Boswell, Lead Pastor, The Trails Church, Celina, Texas;
hymnwriter

The Beauty and Power of Biblical Exposition

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Preaching the Literary Artistry and Genres of the Bible

Douglas Sean O'Donnell
and Leland Ryken

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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To R. Kent Hughes

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Introduction

NEARLY THIRTY YEARS AGO I took Dr. Leland Ryken's *Literature of the Bible* course. It was the first time I was introduced to Lee's wit, wisdom, and unfair grading policies. He gave me a B. It was also the first time I was introduced to literary genres and the way in which the teacher of God's Word, if he desires to be a good and faithful (as well as insightful and interesting!) instructor, needs to understand how each genre works.

What I remember most about that class, besides the cute petite brunette who would become my wife, was Lee's retelling of the story of the left-handed judge Ehud from the tribe of Benjamin, who assassinated the arrogant and obese Moabite King Eglon (Judg. 3:12–30). In their private meeting, Ehud grabbed his concealed double-edged sword from his right thigh and thrust it into the unsuspecting Eglon with his left hand. The sovereign's stomach swallowed the sword, and he died as Ehud escaped. As Dr. Ryken retold the story, pointing out the important details, and how the genre of narrative worked and is to work on our intellects and emotions, I was captivated. "That will preach," I thought to myself.

From that day until today, I have continued—in the form of his books and friendship—to sit under Dr. Ryken's tutelage. I have

learned a lot! I deserve an A, or some honorary acknowledgment from him that he approves of my development! Well, I suppose his offer to coauthor this tome is just that; or, at least I'll take it as that, and I will notify the Wheaton College registrar posthaste to change my GPA!

When Lee approached me and asked if I would team up with him on writing a book on preaching the literary genres of the Bible, I was honored. When he told me that he would like me, as the preacher, to be “the voice” of the book,¹ I was doubly honored. The deal was that he would write on the topic of each chapter, then I would have total freedom to use what I wanted, restate it in my own words, and add a preacher’s perspective. He said that he didn’t need to see anything I wrote. Trust. Freedom. Wings to write!

As I began to soar—sifting through his words with delight and as the air beneath my flight—an idea came to mind to honor him as he had honored me. Yes, what you have in hand is my personal festschrift to him. I have taken both the new material he has written for this particular project and some of the most applicable tidbits from some of his seventy-plus monographs, articles, and essays, to give voice to *our* thoughts on how to preach the genres of narrative, parable, epistle, poetry, proverbs, and visionary writing. The purpose of our shared endeavor is simple. We want to help you “bring the thunder,” as preachers often say to and pray for each other. In the process of determining this book’s title, at one point I suggested “Reversed Thunder” while reading Ryken’s perceptive commentary on George Herbert’s poem “Prayer.”² One

- 1 As a personal aside, Lee knows that English literature is his expertise. He is not a preacher. I believe he stepped back from having two voices to this book—half a chapter by him and half by me—because he has such a high respect for the pastor’s calling and he thought my voice, as a preacher, would be more directly relevant to our readers.
- 2 Leland Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classical Devotional Poems* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 88–89.

of Herbert's images to describe prayer is reversed thunder, in the sense that, through prayer we fire up petitions to heaven like a thunderbolt.³ I'm borrowing that compelling metaphor, but using it in a different way. The idea is this: what is going on behind the powerful thunderbolt of the Sunday morning thunder? What happens, in other words, if we reverse the timeframe from Sunday's strike from Scripture to the pastor's calm study of Scripture in the days before? What is behind the heat and light? My point is plain, or I hope is plain. I will make it plain now: Understanding what happens in the pastor's study, as he seeks to understand, and then explain, illustrate, and apply God's Word, can help everyone who regularly teaches God's Word tap into the surge behind the storm.

SEVEN SHARED CONVICTIONS

Before we peer into that power source, it is important to say something of the shared convictions behind this collaborative endeavor, or "our book," as we would so often title our many emails to each other. We have at least seven. First, a literary approach to the Bible is essential to good preaching because the Bible is literature. To rightly divide the word of truth requires an understanding of how the Bible is put together. Faithful biblical exposition necessitates careful literary analysis. As Martin Luther once stated, "I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure." The context of that quote is that Luther is expressing his "desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible" in the pulpit because he sees that "by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of

3 For further explication on the poem, see Leland Ryken, *The Devotional Poetry of Donne, Herbert, and Milton*, Christian Guides to the Classics (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 54–55.

sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily.”⁴ Likewise, we are convinced that, on the negative side, a handling of the Bible that ignores its literary nature is a sin of omission;⁵ and, on the positive side, a handling of the Bible that recognizes that the Bible is a literary anthology in which the individual parts belong to various literary genres and embraces “even a modicum of self-conscious literary analysis” will greatly enhance the proclamation of God’s Word.⁶

Second, a literary approach to the Bible helps avoid reductionistic preaching. Some pastors think that expository preaching is just the homiletical equivalent of expository writing, the sole aim of which is to convey facts and information. The point of preaching Psalm 23, it might be said, is to reduce all the images to ideas. But why would we take the poetry out of the poem? Psalm 23 is not a collection of ideas; it is a beautiful short poem that God inspired David to write so that we might understand the picture it paints, the emotions it expresses, and the timeless truths it propounds. Here’s another example, from a biblical story Ryken often uses to defend and illustrate the point, and for good reason. In his own words,

The sixth command tells us, “You shall not murder.” The story of Cain (Gen. 4:1–16) embodies that same truth by means

4 Martin Luther, “Letter to Eoban Hess, 29 March 1523,” in *Luthers Briefwechsel*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 120 vols. (Weimar, Germany: Böhlhaus, 1883–2009), 3:50.

5 “There is a . . . sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are” (C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* [New York: Macmillan, 1958], 3).

6 Leland Ryken, “The Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” in *Preach the Word: Essays on Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 39.

of characters and events. The story of Cain does not use the abstract word *murder*, nor does it contain a command not to murder. It *shows* that we should not commit murder. The author of any story wants us to vicariously relive an experience in our imagination, and by that means encounter truth. That is how literature works. If the author of Genesis 4 had primarily wanted us to grasp an idea with our minds, he would have given us an idea. The fact that he gave us something else obligates us to take account of this “something else.” The biblical authors need to be allowed to set the agenda for how we are expected to assimilate what they wrote. What happens when we ignore the narrative form of the story of Cain? The most customary result is that the text is reduced to an idea. Reductionism in this form is the only thing left to do with the text if we ignore the story with its characters, settings, and events. If we ignore the narrative form, we are not dealing with the text in terms of its intended mode of operation, which is to get us to share an experience. Kenneth Bailey has correctly written that a story (and by extension any literary text) is “not a delivery system for an idea that can be discarded once the idea (the shell) is fired. Rather [it] is a house in which the reader or listener is invited to take up residence . . . and look out on the world from the point of view of the story.”⁷

7 Leland Ryken, “Why We Need to Read and Interpret the Bible as Literature,” unpublished, quoting Kenneth Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 87. A number of ideas and expressions in this introduction come from Ryken’s unpublished article. Elsewhere, Ryken writes of Genesis 4, “A person listening to an expository sermon on the story of Cain should be aware from start to finish that the text being explicated is a narrative, not a theological treatise. The text exists to be relived in its fullness, not dipped into as a source of proof texts for moral and theological generalizations” (Ryken, “Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” 43).

Third, and closely related to the second, a literary approach to the Bible acknowledges that, throughout the Bible, meaning is communicated through various literary forms.⁸ There is more to the story of Cain’s murder of Abel than the application “don’t kill your brother.” Likewise, the nature of the Canaanite woman’s “great faith” in Matthew 15:21–28 is understood only through her dialogue with and response to Jesus.⁹ Faith is defined only once in the Bible (Heb. 11:1), but it is illustrated in narrative form hundreds of times. Think of the stories of Abraham, Job, and Habakkuk. Think also of the poems of the Sons of Korah. In Psalm 46:1–3, the sons sing of resilient faith:

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way,
 though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea,
 though its waters roar and foam,
 though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

It would be ridiculous to ignore or disregard this poem’s literary form and features, for the truths of the text come through the form and features. It is only as we imagine God like a mighty unshakable and secure fortress (the image used in the final line of the poem, “the God of Jacob is our fortress,” v. 11) when a sudden powerful

8 “There is no content without the form in which it is expressed” (Leland Ryken, *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015], 10).

9 As Flannery O’Connor notes of narrative, “the whole story is the meaning, because it is an experience, not an abstraction” (*Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* [New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1969], 73). For an example on how doctrine is taught in narrative form, see Douglas Sean O’Donnell, *“O Woman, Great Is Your Faith!”: Faith in the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021).

earthquake causes the side of a mountain to crash into the sea, that we grasp the point of the poem. The images embody the idea. The poets could have simply said, “God is our security in times of calamity,” but instead they provide pictures that make the very point more memorable and tangible. The medium is not the message, but the message cannot be fully obtained without the medium. We cannot discard the form once we have deduced the idea. To merely preach an abstract idea is to fail to do justice to the authors’ intent (the Sons of Korah wrote a God-inspired poem!)¹⁰ and to pull the plug on the power of word pictures in preaching the Word.

Fourth, a literary approach to the Bible helps the preacher help his congregation to relive the text as fully as possible, so as to live out the message of the text. Years ago, Professor Richard Pratt wrote a book on interpreting Old Testament narratives called *He Gave Us Stories*. Yes, God gave us stories! He also gave us poems, parables, proverbs, laws, lists, letters, doxologies, debates, dialogues, lamentations, hymns, apocalyptic visions, chronicles, encomiums, treaties, and more. He gave us these various genres for various reasons, one of which is to re-experience in community the ideas, expressions, emotions, and applications of each unique text. For example, we cannot relive a story without encountering and analyzing the settings, characters, and plots; and, we cannot relive a poem without assimilating the structure and symbols of the poem. The Bible is

¹⁰ Here is where the doctrine of inspiration comes into view. Did God inspire the forms of the Bible, or only the content? Both! God led some biblical authors to write stories, others to write poems, others to write satire and proverbs and epistles. The Holy Spirit superintended the process of composition undertaken by biblical authors and also the resulting products of that composition (see 2 Pet. 1:21). Thus, whenever a biblical author expressed the content of a passage in a literary form, we can safely conclude that he *intended* that the preacher interpret the passage using ordinary literary methods of analysis. Put differently, whenever a biblical author embodies his message in a literary genre and by means of literary techniques, he *intends* that pastors engage in literary analysis.

not predominantly an ideational book—a book of randomly disassociated lists of theological propositions. Christians sometimes treat the Bible that way. What a shame. Christian preachers sometimes preach the Bible that way. A double portion of shame!

When a preacher and his congregation fail to relive a text, they fail to enter into the human experience so carefully and vividly expressed in Scripture. The Bible embodies human experience—the tears of death, the sadness of sickness, the sting of betrayal, the flush of sexual arousal. It is a book of human experience, not merely or mainly a book of religious and moral ideas. The nightly news might tell us what *happened*, whereas the Bible tells us what *happens*—what is true for all people in all places and times. Thus, “to gain relevance, all a preacher needs to do is explicate the human experience embedded in the literary parts of the Bible.”¹¹ Indeed, he needs to “resist the impulse immediately to reduce every biblical passage to a set of theological ideas,”¹² and use the human experience expressed in Scripture to bridge the gap from the ancient world of the text to today. As Ryken exhorts, “We need to hear the voice of human experience from the pulpit.” For to hear that voice is to deeply connect God’s breathed out word with God’s gasping people—to teach, reprove, correct, and train them in righteousness, to equip them for every good work (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17). “The test of whether an expository preacher has dealt adequately with a text,” Ryken continues, “is simple: if listeners have been led to see their own experiences in the text and exposition, the expositor has interacted with the subject matter in keeping with its literary nature.”¹³

11 Ryken, “Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” 42.

12 Leland Ryken, “Reading the Bible as Literature,” in *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2570.

13 Ryken, “Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” 42, 44.

Fifth, a literary approach to the Bible offers an awareness and appreciation of the artistry of God's inspired Word. While the Bible is written in plain and common ancient languages, and much of the Bible uses plain talk to talk about profound realities, the beauty of expression and artistry of arrangement is everywhere. Just as we are called to worship the Lord "in the beauty of holiness" (Ps. 96:9 KJV), preachers should preach, and all Christians should delight in, the beauty of the holiness of God's Holy Word. Beauty mattered to God when he created the world, and it mattered to him as he moved the authors of the Bible to compose. "The writer of Ecclesiastes states his philosophy of composition, portraying himself as a self-conscious stylist and wordsmith who arranged his material 'with great care' and who 'sought to find words of delight' (Eccles. 12:9–10). Surely other biblical writers did the same."¹⁴ Every Bible preacher has the responsibility to do something with that beauty. To underscore, explain, illustrate, and apply the imagery, metaphors, similes, hyperboles, apostrophe, personification, paradox, and pun, and lots of other literary devices is a sacred duty and delight!¹⁵ If artistry is found on every page of the Bible, Bible preachers need to expound the Bible with that in mind.

Sixth, a literary approach to the Bible opens the entire canon of Scripture to exploration and exposition. Ryken recounts the time when a longtime minister confided that before he mastered literary analysis of the Bible, he would often read a psalm to patients in a hospital but would never consider preaching from a psalm because he "didn't know what to do with it." Mastering all the literary

¹⁴ Ryken, "Reading the Bible as Literature," 2570.

¹⁵ See Leland Ryken, *A Complete Handbook of Literary Forms in the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); and "Glossary of Literary Terms and Genres," in *The Literary Study Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 1975–1988.

genres and understanding how various literary devices work gives the expositor the confidence and skill to cover all of the Bible. When he comes to the opening scene of the Song of Solomon, the Olivet Discourse, a parable of judgment, a paradoxical proverb, or John's visions on Patmos, he doesn't ask, "What do I do with this?" and "Oh, heavens, how on earth do I preach this?" The whole of Scripture is wide open and ready for exploration and exposition.

Seventh (we felt that a seventh conviction was numerologically necessary!), a literary approach to the Bible adds freshness and enjoyment to our reading and preaching, along with an antidote to misinterpretation of God's Word. While that's a sentence-full, the three points of this seventh conviction are straightforward. Freshness: if we have never viewed the Bible as literature and as a book that reveals its beauty and truth by literary means, a literary approach to preaching yields fresh insights. Enjoyment: if we can educate ourselves to see the literary qualities of the Bible, we will experience the same pleasure we have when we read Emily Dickinson, Charles Dickens, or J. R. R. Tolkien. Misinterpretation: if we can correctly identify the genre (the book of Jonah is a satire, not a hero story) and literary devices (Proverbs 3:11 is a synonymous parallelism—making the same point two ways, not making two points), we will rightly interpret God's Word for God's people. Which, as a final aside, always bring freshness and enjoyment to all.

THE *END* OF THE INTRODUCTION

One of the most telling (and sadly accurate, in my opinion) statements Ryken makes in his excellent essay on "The Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching" is this: "Many Bible expositors would assent to . . . the literary nature of the Bible, only to ignore it when they stand in the pulpit. Mere assent to the idea that the

Bible is a literary anthology has not produced a literary approach to the Bible.”¹⁶

The two main goals of this book are straightforward: First, we desire to inform and inspire pastors to understand that “attentiveness to the literary dimensions of the Bible should be foregrounded in expository sermons.”¹⁷ A literary analysis of the Bible is invaluable to faithful preaching. Stop ignoring the obvious; start embracing the important.¹⁸ Second, we seek to supply a foundation for preachers to move from sermons filled with merely abstract theological propositions and proof-texted moral applications to sermons that are fresh, relevant, interesting, and accurate-to-the-authorial-intention—words on God’s Word that relive the human experience and revive a love for God and others. So, embrace the arsenal of analytic tools offered. And take up the delightful task of preaching words of delight to God’s (usually) delightful people!

In what follows, we cover preaching narrative (ch. 1), parables (ch. 2), epistles (ch. 3), poetry (ch. 4), proverbs (ch. 5), and visionary writings (ch. 6). Our sequel on preaching discourse, satire, hero stories, law, gospel, prophecy, fables, riddles, maxims, monologues and dialogues, and the like will be out precisely 144,000 days after this book releases. (Let the reader understand.) For this present volume, each chapter will be divided into two parts: the first part will cover how to *read* a specific genre; the second will cover how to *preach* it. Basically, I have taken Lee’s material and translated it

16 Ryken, “Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” 44.

17 Ryken, “Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” 44, 47.

18 “Everything that writers put into their composition is something they regarded as important, including the literary aspects of a text. If literary matters were important to the writers of the Bible, they need to be important to us as readers” and preachers (Ryken, *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible*, 10).

INTRODUCTION

so that preachers get the full benefit from it. I have also added my own insights built on his tutelage and my years of pastoral experience. So, if you ever wanted to figure out how Dr. Leland Ryken's lifetime of work on the Bible as literature can help you in your preaching, keep reading!

The Greatest Stories Ever Told

Preaching Narrative

SIX QUESTIONS. Answer honestly. First, have you ever heard a preacher use the Bible as a launching pad; that is, a text is read near the start of the sermon, and then, once the preacher gets into his message, the Bible recedes from view and rarely resurfaces? I have seen some preachers lift up the Bible, read a verse, and then say absolutely nothing about the Bible! I assume this doesn't describe you.

Second, have you ever heard a preacher use the Bible as a road map that travels through as many parallel passages as possible; that is, a narrative is read (let's say, from the Synoptics) and then its parallels in the other Gospels are quickly exegeted, then Paul is quoted at length, and finally you earn a gold star for flipping the fastest to everywhere in the Bible but the actual story that was read as the Scripture reading for the day? Instead of understanding a particular narrative within the context of the full narrative, and living in that text for the whole sermon and experiencing an in-depth experience of the story, you are whisked away to a thousand

rabbit holes of exegetical curiosity. Been there? Heard that? Might have done that a time or two?

Third, have you ever heard a preacher use the Bible to moralize a text? For example, on a Men's Retreat the story of Judah and Tamar is treated as an exposition on the importance of avoiding sexually immoral women on business trips, and the narrative of Joseph and Potiphar's wife as the follow-up talk on how we can have victory, as Joseph did, over the sexually aggressive woman at work? That will preach. But it is not how those stories should be preached. The story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38) derives its meaning, as any biblical narrative does, from the literary whole, namely, the story of Joseph recorded in Genesis 37–50. The story of Judah and Tamar is more about God keeping his promises than about an immoral sex act, and it fits within the story of Joseph in that Joseph saves the lives of Judah's offspring, an offspring from which the Christ came.

Fourth, have you ever heard a preacher use the Bible as a lecture on systematic theology; that is, he gives a doctrinal sermon that is divorced, not from verses in the narrative, but from the narrative itself? For example, the miracle of Jesus walking on water becomes merely a proof text for the doctrine of Jesus's divinity. The story itself is stripped of its textual beauty so that one doctrine can be emphasized. That narrative does confirm that doctrine, but that is not the sole intent of the narrative. It misses the God-woven texture of a story that offers multifaceted truths about God, humanity, discipleship, sin, and salvation.

Fifth, have you ever heard a preacher use the Bible as a sideshow for the slideshow? That is, he uses a detailed PowerPoint presentation or video clips that dominate the sermon? Many churches today fail to recognize the power of a good story and storyteller. There is nothing more riveting than listening to a master teacher work

through a masterfully written story about the Master! Artwork or graphics on a slide can help the listener (and looker) follow along and illustrate complex concepts visually, but tech-dominated “preaching” is dominated by the wrong medium. What happens is that most people delight in the interesting images and amusing clips, not the very Word of God.

Sixth, have you ever heard a preacher use the Bible as a starting point to his own imaginative narrative exposé; that is, he pretends to be a character in the story and adds a dozen details to the inspired narrative? For example, when he comes to the detail of Zacchaeus’s size, a quarter of the sermon “exegetes” its significance through actual actions. A tree is on stage. The preacher makes himself small by wearing a long robe, dropping to his knees, and scurrying across the stage. He comes to the tree, eyes it, then the congregation. They cheer him on. He climbs the tree. Okay, I’ll admit, I have never seen that, but nothing would surprise me today. The point, in question form, is this: why the need to expand in the extreme upon a God-inspired narrative? Is your dramatic interpretation really an improvement on the Spirit’s inspiration?

If you answered yes to any or all of the above questions, let me ask you a final question: Do you lament the current state of preaching within Bible-believing churches? I imagine so. Well, one sure remedy to such models of preaching is a serious commitment to the literary nature of the Bible. For think about it: One cannot preach “the-Bible-as-a-launching-pad” sermons, or any of the above examples, and faithfully preach any of the stories of Scripture. Envision a sermon on David and Goliath, the Gerasene demoniac, or the conversion of Saul that begins with a quote from the most popular verse from the text and off the preacher goes on a tangent, never to return to one of the greatest stories ever told.

In this chapter we will explore how to read and preach the most prevalent genre in the Bible.¹ Narrative is not the most important genre just because it is the most prevalent (each genre is essential for a full-orbed preaching ministry), but if you do not understand the basics of this genre, you will be greatly limited. Completely limited! For even the non-narrative parts of the Bible take their place within the overarching metanarrative that unifies the Bible. The central character in the organizing story of the Bible is God, and the central literary (and theological!) concern of the Bible is the characterization (or depiction) of God. The acts of God constitute the plot of the master story of the Bible.² And every creature interacts with this divine protagonist. So, of all the chapters in this short book, we invite you to eye and apply this most foundational one.

HOW TO READ BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

In his *MasterClass* video on “Storytelling and Writing,” Salman Rushdie states, “We need stories to understand ourselves. We are the only creature that does this unusual thing—of telling each other stories in order to try to understand what kind of creature we are.” Later he says, “When a child is born, the first thing a child requires is safety and love. The next thing that the child asks for

- 1 Reflecting on the prevalence of stories in the Bible, Thomas G. Long writes, “There are battle stories, betrayal stories, stories about seduction and treachery in the royal court, stories about farmers and fools, healing stories, violent stories, funny stories and sad ones, stories of death, and stories of resurrection. In fact, stories are so common in Scripture that some students have claimed, understandably but incorrectly, that the Bible is exclusively a narrative collection. This is an exaggeration, of course—there is much non-narrative material in the Bible—but the claim that the Bible is a ‘story book’ is not far off the mark” (*Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], 66).
- 2 “Although the story of what God does is the primary action in the Bible, it is not the only one, and we should not disparage or minimize the other storylines” (Leland Ryken, *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015], 15).

is “Tell me a story.” That is where we start. Human experience. “Tell me a story” is perhaps the most universal human impulse. We live in a story-shaped world, and our lives themselves have a narrative quality about them. We universally resonate with stories! So, why wouldn’t we, as preachers, do everything in our power to understand how to handle (even master) this genre? Do you want to connect with your congregation? Of course. Then don’t underestimate the power of comprehending and communicating God’s uniquely designed stories to people made in his image. You will find no more promising sermon material than the stories God gave to his church and world.

THE COMPONENTS OF A STORY

If you have been to seminary, you will have learned that no principle of biblical hermeneutics is more important than that a written text needs to be approached in terms of the kind of writing that it is. Right? Maybe. And surely you had a whole class on preaching narrative. Right? Wrong. Or, likely wrong. Well, in this chapter, we offer no master class, but we do submit to you a short and hopefully inspirational tutorial. We hope we inspire you to learn more; to build your library, and to actually read what is in your library. But we know that pastors are busy, almost as busy as literary scholars and Bible publishers! So, our *Concise Manual on Preaching Narrative (While Invigorating the Elect and Captivating Converts)* awaits you. We begin with the two foundational steps that you need to take each time you come to a Bible story.

First, know that a story is a story. Be able to identify the genre. If the text in view starts, “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away,” you need to turn off your television, computer, or app. But if it starts, “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that

all the world should be registered,” you need to know that a God-breathed story has started and that your congregation is soon to be thoroughly engaged by your skillful retelling. And, if needed, feel free to ask your in-house droid, that is programmed for both protocol and etiquette, “What genre is Luke 2:1?” Both C-3PO and Siri will give you the correct answer. But you are surely not so shallow. You likely listen to Bach as you translate Sunday’s text, and sip Intelligentsia Coffee when you turn to form your homiletical outline. Okay, maybe you don’t. But you read books like the one in hand because you want to improve your preaching. And you know a story when you see a story.

But are you committed to analyzing a biblical narrative in keeping with the traits of that genre? To do that is the second step. Stories consist of three components—setting, characters, and plot. Each of these needs to be acknowledged and analyzed in our treatment of a biblical narrative. I find such analysis extremely pleasurable, and I often share aspects of my delight in the story with God’s people from the pulpit. Because I delight not only in *what* God says to us in his Word but in *how* he has said it, both I and my hearers grow in our knowledge of God and appreciation of how he has chosen to communicate to us. Part of that growth is that together we use and understand terms like setting (“Notice that our passage is set in Jericho”), characters (“Look how Rachel is described”), and plot (“As we see this drama unfold, we come now to its climax—the point of no return”). The terms we all learned in high school English literature class are the right terms to use when reading and presenting the stories of the Bible. By the time I preached through the Gospel of Matthew at New Covenant Church (in Naperville, Illinois), and the Gospel of Mark at Westminster Presbyterian Church (in Elgin,

Illinois), my congregation knew, understood, and used a plethora of literary terms associated with the genre of narrative. Such knowledge is not esoteric; it is immensely practical—as practical as learning what the word “gigabyte” means when buying a cell phone, “audible” when quarterbacking a football team, and “cinematography” when hosting the Oscars.

Setting

Setting is one of the most overlooked but essential aspects of proper exegesis of biblical narratives. But what does it matter that we take careful note of historical (“In the year that King Uzziah died,” Isa. 6:1), geographical (“Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king,” 2 Chron. 10:1), topological (“He went up on the mountain,” Matt. 5:1), physical (“Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome,” 1 Sam. 16:12), cultural (“And as Jesus reclined at table,” Matt. 9:10), chronological (“When the seven days were almost completed,” Acts 21:27), or descriptive (“On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne,” Acts 12:21) details? First and foremost, if it mattered to the biblical authors, it should matter to us. Put differently, if it mattered to the Holy Spirit, it should matter to the Spirit-filled preacher. If every jot and tittle matters (Matt. 5:18 KJV), surely each detail an inspired storyteller adds to his inspired story contributes to the story.

Second, the setting provides the necessary context to the characters’ actions within the narrative. It “enables the action that occurs within it.”³ The more we know about *who* is *where when* and

3 Leland Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 29.

perhaps *why*, the better we will understand *what* is about to happen. Knowing something about the location, climate, nationality of the characters, time of day, season of the year, and so on, helps us make better sense of the story.

Third, the setting ignites and exercises our imaginations, making a story, with its vivid descriptions, come alive. When we read, “for a long time [he] had worn no clothes, and he had not lived in a house but among the tombs” (Luke 8:27), we *see* a terribly sad scene. We visualize the cold, naked man and his dark, eerie shelter. We want a solution to his problem. We want Jesus to step in to save—to clean up this unclean scene.

Fourth, the setting often takes on symbolic overtones and becomes a major part of the message or theme of a story. For example, the informed exegete grasps the intrabiblical allusions of Jesus in “the wilderness” at the start of his ministry, and the fourfold repetition of the word “Passover” when he served the twelve at the Last Supper; and he pieces together the themes that Jesus, as true Israel, succeeds where Israel of old failed, and that, as the Passover Lamb, he is sacrificed so that God might pass over his people, saving them from their sin.⁴

Fifth, the setting often creates the mood or builds an atmosphere. When we read, “And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land” (Mark 15:33), the author has already engaged and prepared his readers for Jesus’s dark cry of dereliction (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” v. 34).

4 “Again, in the midst of the feeding of the five thousand in the wilderness, Mark pauses to note that the multitude sat down on the ‘green grass.’ Why does he describe the color of the grass as green but not the sky as blue or the sand as yellow? Is Isaiah’s vision of the wilderness in blossom even now being realized?” (Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 78–79).

Characters

Characters are a second component of stories. A character is simply a person in the story. There are major and minor characters, as well as the main character—the protagonist. All the unfolding action of the story spins around the axis of this “first” or “primary” (*prōt-*) “struggler” or “competitor” (*agōnistēs*), and one of the most useful strategies for mastering a story is to regard oneself as the observant traveling companion of the protagonist.⁵ Like Christian in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, we follow him on his journey until the end.

We get to know the characters in a story by their abilities, traits, roles and relationships, stated or inferred attitudes and emotions, dialogue, actions, titles and names, physical description, gestures, authorial insider information, foils, and responses from other characters.

A good overriding premise is that we should get to know every character in a story as fully as the details in the text enable us to do. For example, in Matthew 15:21–28, the Evangelist gives the woman who approaches Jesus the archaic title “Canaanite” (v. 22). That label, along with the setting of “Tyre and Sidon” (v. 21), the impatient indignation of the apostles (“Send her away, for she is crying out after us,” v. 23), and the hesitancy of Christ (“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” v. 24), reveals to the reader her status. This character is an outsider to the people and privileges of Israel. And yet the storyteller so shapes the story that we grow both in sympathy and admiration as the story reaches its climax. As Jesus pronounces, “O woman, great

5 Bible stories “center on the struggles of a protagonist, usually hindered or opposed by an antagonist. Supporting characters also appear, but exegetes will focus primarily on the protagonist and antagonist” (Jeffrey D. Arthurs, “Preaching the Old Testament Narratives,” in *Preaching the Old Testament*, ed. Scott M. Gibson [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006], 79).

is your faith” (v. 28), we gladly join in his high commendation. Despite her race (Gentile), gender (woman), and problem (a demon-possessed daughter), we admire her and want to emulate her. And through her movement, confessions, doggedness (!), and postures we get the theological points of the passage. We too should move toward Jesus (she “came” to him, vv. 22, 25), call him “Lord” (vv. 22, 25, 27) and “Son of David” (v. 22), beg him for mercy (“Have mercy on me,” v. 22), persist in prayer (“she came” to him again, saying, “Lord, help me,” v. 25), and worship him (“she . . . knelt before him,” v. 25). We should also be repulsed by her foil—the disciples. We don’t want to share in their religious impatience, lack of compassion, narrow view of the kingdom, bigotry, and likely chauvinism.

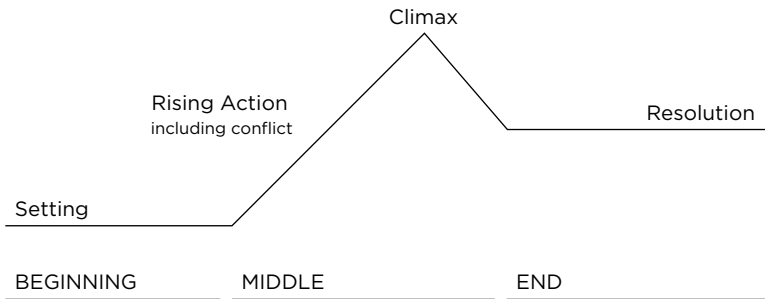
Plot

Plot is the third component. Aristotle’s ancient but still accurate statement that plot is the “soul” of a story in that the action moves the narrative, and that each story has a beginning (an action is introduced), a middle (it progresses toward the appointed goal), and an end (it reaches closure as the issues that have been introduced are resolved) suffices.⁶ And each plot is built around one or more conflicts that reach resolution at the conclusion. *Conflict and Resolution* is not only the name of my new 1980s flashback band (we do weddings and Bar mitzvahs), it is the core of grasping and explicating this genre. And the preacher who thinks that it is optional to name the conflicts and trace their progress is, to paraphrase an ’80s icon (Mr. T), to be pitied as a fool. The good reader, following Aristotle’s advice, needs to see

6 Aristotle, *The Rhetoric and the Poetics of Aristotle*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1984), 1450a.

how the individual parts of the plot relate to the whole. The good preacher needs to divide the story, no matter how brief, into its successive units, and name these units accurately. He needs to understand and implement in his study (and most subtly in his sermon) the arc of the story: setting, rising action (including the conflict), climax, and resolution (see diagram 1.1).

Diagram 1.1: Story Arc



“Exposition” could be called “background,” and it usually involves the *setting* being set: some character (Jesus) somewhere (in Cana of Galilee) on perhaps a certain day (someone’s wedding day) is about to act (turn water into wine). Take, for example, the story of Abraham’s (almost) sacrifice of his son. The background is, “After these things God tested Abraham” (Gen. 22:1). “These things” presumably refers to the birth of Isaac, God’s protection of Hagar and Ishmael, and Abraham’s treaty with Abimelech (Genesis 21). The fact that God *tests* the man he has called and with whom he has made a covenant introduces an imbalance, a disequilibrium that needs resolution. This pattern is typical of all plots in biblical narratives. So too are the next four stages:

Conflict	God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, a request surprisingly out of step with the promise of offspring.
Rising action	Father and son journey to the mountain of sacrifice, which includes Isaac carrying the wood to light the fire and asking about the animal for sacrifice, and Abraham constructing an altar, binding his son, and raising the blade for sacrifice.
Climax	The angel of the Lord stops the sacrifice. Abraham has passed the test!
Resolution	God provides an acceptable sacrifice (a ram) and reaffirms his covenant promises to Abraham.

Through this customary structural arrangement, biblical stories, like most stories told around the campfire and found in world literature, are voiced. We go back to the fact that God gave his people stories. And it is through these stories that he *shows* us the truth. For example, the accurate and important theological proposition that God is sovereign is sketched across the final fourteen chapters of the first book of the Bible. The preacher who ignores plot when he walks through the final narrative in Genesis, and then all of Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, and Jonah, is indeed the fool. If you want to invite your congregation's "interest and emotional involvement, while at the same time imbuing the events with meaning,"⁷ you need to know how, and have a commitment to, "plodding" out the plot.⁸

7 Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England, UK: Almond, 1989), 93.

8 Bonus insight for footnote readers: Storytellers tell their stories with beauty and skill using plot devices, such as foreshadowing (the death of John the Baptist in relation to Jesus's death), suspense (what will come of Joseph's dreams?), testing (Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac), poetic justice (the fates of Mordecai and Haman), irony (the taunt, "If you are the Son of

HOW TO PREACH BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The careful expositor understands that “good narrative is a complex interweaving of characters, plot, and setting presented by the narrator, who speaks from outside the plot, moving it forward by reporting activities, descriptions and dialogue.” He also grasps that the biblical narrator is often “*omniscient*, knowing the inner lives of the characters and selectively representing their thoughts, feelings and intentions . . . *omnipresent*, moving easily from one location to another, [and] *omnipotent* in the domain of the story,” in that he “conveys a moral and ethical tone, passing judgment on characters and events.”⁹ Indeed, it is that *tone* that the expositor eyes, picking up on “the author’s attitude toward his or her subject.” Is his tone “sentimental, optimistic, cynical, bitter, objective, compassionate, irreverent,” or a mixture of “sweet sadness, hopeful realism, or understated gratitude”?¹⁰ You decide. More than “you decide,” you need to form a sensible sermon. The advice of two doctors (Lee and I) follows, one an octogenarian who has published nearly as many books as there are skyscrapers in Chicago.

We transition from the study to the pulpit, seeking to answer the question, “How do we express in sermon form a biblical narrative’s literary features and message?” Put differently, “How does our exegesis of the text’s literary features help equip us to reproduce the text’s rhetorical impact in our sermons?”¹¹ Below are eight suggestions for preaching a sermon on a biblical narrative.

God, come down from the cross,” Matt. 27:40), and surprise (the Roman centurion who crucified Christ confesses him as “Son of God”), to name a few.

- 9 Elaine A. Phillips, “Novella, Story, Narrative,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 492, emphasis mine.
- 10 Andrew T. Le Peau, *Write Better: A Lifelong Editor on Craft, Art, and Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 138.
- 11 See Arthurs, “Preaching the Old Testament Narratives,” 73–74.

Pick the Proper Pericope

Pick the proper pericope.¹² This suggestion is obvious and usually easy to do, as most English Bible translations correctly divide the various narratives for you. For example, in the ESV the story of Samson is divided as such:

The Birth of Samson	Judges 13
Samson's Marriage	Judges 14
Samson Defeats the Philistines	Judges 15
Samson and Delilah	Judges 16:1–22
The Death of Samson	Judges 16:23–31

Of course, with any long narrative within Scripture, it is possible to do one sermon and cover the plot. However, it is impossible to do justice to all the important details. Thus, I suggest, for Samson's story, that the expositor does justice to the story only if the sermon series is five sermons. Moreover, if one goes beyond five sermons, the sermons wouldn't fit the five unique plots of each pericope.

That said, there are times, especially in the Gospels, when two or three stories should be told together in one sermon, as that follows best the author's intent. For example, the three short miracle stories in Matthew 8:1–17—the cleansing of a leper, the healing of the centurion's servant, and the cooling of Peter's mother-in-law's fever, along with Jesus's evening ministry where “he cast out the [evil] spirits . . . and healed all who were sick” (Matt. 8:16)—are all intended to make the same point: “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took our illnesses and bore our

¹² The Greek word *perikopē* means “section,” literally “cutting across.” It is a way of talking about a section within a biblical text that is separate from what comes before and after it because it forms a new or different coherent literary unit.

diseases” (v. 17, quoting Isa. 53:4). Jesus is the prophesied servant whose sufferings defeat disease, death, and the devil. Matthew 8:1–17 should be preached as one sermon.

So too should a “Markan sandwich” (or interpolation) be preached in one sermon. Markan sandwiches are a literary technique that the Evangelist employs, where he “sandwiches one passage into the middle of another with an intentional and discernable theological purpose,” emphasizing “the major motifs of the Gospel.”¹³ He does this, for example, in Mark 5:21–43:

- A Jairus pleads with Jesus to save his dying daughter (vv. 21–24)
- B The woman with an issue of blood touches Jesus’s garment and is saved (vv. 25–34)
- A Jesus heals Jairus’s daughter (vv. 35–43)

We see here the typical A-B-A schema of such interpolations. The two stories (A-A and B) should be preached together in one sermon, and the key themes of the extent of Jesus’s power, the salvation found in him, and the nature of true faith should be included.

Relive the Story

After picking the proper pericope, our next task is to relive the story. “The stories of the Bible,” Ryken writes, “will succeed only to the extent to which we exercise our imaginations and allow ourselves to be transported from our own time and place into another time and place.”¹⁴ The great advantage of narrative is its

¹³ James R. Edwards, “Markan Sandwiches: The Significance of Interpolations in Markan Narratives,” *Novum Testamentum* 31.3 (1989): 196.

¹⁴ Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 53.

power of transport—its ability to lift us out of our own time and place and plant us in another time and place. We are transported there through understanding the setting, characters, and plot. We will come to that next. For now, we immerse ourselves in the story as fully as possible with a central goal in mind: to understand, and then explain, illustrate, and apply the human experience expressed in the biblical narrative.

Stories take human experience as their subject. Truthfulness to life and reality is the particular gift of literature and art, and we need to respect this before we involve ourselves with the other type of truth, namely, ideational truth. Every story is an invitation to share an experience. We share that experience with the characters in the story, first of all, but at another level we share the experience with the author or storyteller. The storyteller remains a presiding presence in the story, and we are aware of that presence. This tour guide uses devices of disclosure to influence how we experience and interpret the events of the story. We need to take our cues from the authorial presence in the story. The storyteller determines everything, including what we are allowed to see and vicariously experience.

Take, for example, the short but significant story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). The first half narrates the success of the conception and construction of a great tower. While we don't know precisely what it looked like, we can all envision an impressive building that took amazing ingenuity and effort to build. The second half details this advanced civilization's quick downfall. Human language is confused, the project abandoned, the people divided and dispersed. Their gesture of aspiration toward deity is a complete failure. God judges their pride by thwarting their project.

“Stories,” as Ryken summarizes, “function by first removing us from our own time and place and then (when we reflect and analyze) sending us back to our own world with a sharper sense of understanding.”¹⁵ Indeed! Once we have immersed ourselves in the narrative, we can journey from its world into our own. The Tower of Babel captures the spirit of our age as well as any story in all of Scripture. How’s this list for relatable human experiences (and heaps of homiletical material):

- individual and communal aspiration
- the urge for human fame and achievement
- utopian zeal and dreams
- self-reliance and self-sufficiency
- technology and faith in what it can achieve
- the collective pride of the human race
- the urge for permanence
- the urge for material power
- the city as the locus of human civilization
- human inventiveness and creativity
- social cooperation, based on shared dreams and a single language
- architectural feats
- communal idolatry (finding security in a substitute deity)
- linguistic division among people groups
- the abandonment of hopes and dreams¹⁶

What novelist John Steinbeck wrote of the popularity of the story of Cain (Gen. 4:1–16) could equally be applied to the story of the

¹⁵ Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 22.

¹⁶ Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 21–22.

Tower of Babel: “this is the best-known story in the world because it is everybody’s story . . . the symbol story of the human soul.”¹⁷

After interacting with the themes in the story that correspond with universal (and therefore recognizable) human experience, we seek to share with our congregations our reliving of the storyteller and his story. “The key to prompting empathy in listeners,” Jeffrey Arthurs offers, “is to imaginatively reexperience the text in both your study and the pulpit, and then to express those feelings with conviction.”¹⁸ We pray that God will use our retelling of the biblical narrative to open the minds, touch the hearts, and enliven the wills of those who hear our voices.

Don’t Skip the Setting

Bryan Chapell defines expository preaching as follows: “The main idea of an expository sermon (the topic), the divisions of that idea (the main points), and the development of those divisions (the subpoints) all come from truths the text itself contains. No significant portion of the text is ignored. In other words, expositors willingly stay within the boundaries of a text (and its relevant context) and do not leave until they have surveyed its entirety with their listeners.”¹⁹ In your preaching of biblical narratives, can it be said that “no significant portion of the text is ignored”? Would your congregation say that you do not finish the sermon unless

17 John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin, 1952), 268. “No story has power, nor will last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us.” From Terry R. Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists as Biblical Interpreters* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 62, who quotes from Steinbeck’s *Journal of a Novel*.

18 Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-Create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 98.

19 Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 131.

the text has been “surveyed [in] its entirety,” *including the setting?* However seemingly mundane (e.g., a setting such as “and the next day”), a commitment to expository preaching sees the setting of each story as significant.

To illustrate the importance of setting, let’s walk through the story of the conversion of Zacchaeus. Where is the story set? The first line introduces the hero (Jesus), his first action (“he entered”), the town he entered (“Jericho”), and his reason for entering Jericho (“he . . . was passing through,” Luke 19:1). The phrase “passing through” reminds the reader of Jesus’s ultimate mission in Jerusalem (he is passing through because his passion is his mission) and it adds an ironic twist. Jesus’s mission, as clearly declared in Jesus’s final line in this account, is that he “came to seek and to save the lost” (v. 10). Jesus’s salvation of Zacchaeus fits perfectly with the metanarrative of the cross. He wasn’t just randomly passing through Jericho. He came there on his preordained divine mission to save a certain tax collector. He came to knock down the walls of Zacchaeus’s hard heart.²⁰

Speaking of that man, notice how Luke, in the setting, quickly moves from the hero, Jesus, to the main character, Zacchaeus. He does this in a way often done in the Gospels to introduce something or someone important: “And behold.” Translations that fail to translate the καὶ ἰδοὺ fail to understand the intentionality. The character we are to “behold” (stop and take a good look at) is named (something uncommon in the Synoptics), his occupation stated (“a chief tax collector”), and his financial position within

20 Sometimes the setting takes on symbolic value, and that perhaps is the case here. Moreover, certain place settings, such as Jericho, allow the preacher to flesh out some of the details of that location: e.g., give Old Testament background, archaeological details, and possibly contemporary perspectives on the town.

society noted (“he was . . . rich,” v. 2). In verse 3, his height (a rare character description in the Bible) is also recorded (“he was small in stature”).

Each detail sets us up for actions that occur. Because he was short, Zacchaeus needed to climb a tree to see Jesus. Because he was a chief tax collector, he was despised by his fellow Jews as a greedy traitor who would have defrauded many people (“they all grumbled, ‘He [Jesus] has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner,’” v. 7). Because he was rich, his declaration of repentance is remarkable (“Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold,” v. 8). The detail about Zacchaeus’s wealth also serves as a foil to the rich young ruler, who refused to heed Jesus’s command. Jesus commanded *that* man to sell everything he owned (18:22); Zacchaeus unwittingly obeys. Perhaps he didn’t give away everything, but he must have come close: half to the poor; half to those he had *made* poor (“if I have defrauded . . .”). Finally, his name not only *surprisingly* resurfaces when Jesus calls him by name (“Zacchaeus,” 19:5; how did Jesus know his name?), it offers further irony. His name, זַכָּי (Hebrew), means “pure” or “innocent.” Obviously, this man was not that! He was a notorious “sinner” (v. 7). But he has, by the end of the story, obtained a purity of heart through actually seeing Jesus. Jesus calls him “a son of Abraham,” not merely because he is Jewish but because he, like Abraham, is now justified (declared perfectly innocent) by faith (“And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness,” Gen. 15:6; cf. Rom. 4:1–8). Whether this intratextual allusion is intentional or not, the preacher has license to interpret and illustrate Scripture with Scripture.

So, with the example above, do you see how important the setting is or often can be? Don’t skip it. Soak it in. Set it forth.

Identify the Characters; Identify with the Characters

Our next task is to focus on the characters in the narrative, to both identify them and then identify *with* them. We suggest five steps.

First, list all the characters in the story. Take Korah's rebellion. Here's the start of that story:

Now Korah the son of Izhar, son of Kohath, son of Levi, and Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took men. And they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, 250 chiefs of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men. They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" (Num. 16:1–3)

The list of characters includes God (the Lord), five people (Korah, Dathan, Abiram, Moses, and Aaron), and two large groups of people (250 chiefs of the congregation, the people [or congregation] of Israel).

Second, after assembling the cast of characters, divide them into major and minor characters, determining the function of each in the action. Find the central character/s and those arrayed against him/them; that is, label the protagonist/s and antagonist/s. In the above narrative, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram are the antagonists (they "rose up . . . against"), and Moses and Aaron are the protagonists. Another more advanced division would be between

what literary-critical scholars call a “stock” character (someone who exhibits only one trait), and a “round” character (someone whose attitudes, actions, and dialogue come across as a real, fully developed person).²¹

Third, observe and analyze each key character. “The starting point for good character analysis is a keen eye for the obvious.”²² The first two steps should take only a few minutes. You can do it. You should do it! This third step takes about a half hour. One way to collect the needed data is to use Cornelis Bennema’s chart of character descriptors (table 1.1).²³

Fourth, after you identify the characters and their traits, seek to identify with them. Here is a checklist that Ryken offers to analyze characters:

- Agency: Who or what does the characterizing in a given instance?
- Mode: Does a given piece of data constitute direct characterizing or indirect characterizing? If the former, is the statement of commentary a piece of objective description or an evaluative assessment of a character?
- Within a given piece of data, do you approve or disapprove of what a character does? Overall, is a given character presented positively or negatively in this story?²⁴

21 Jack D. Kingsbury describes “round” characters as “those who possess a variety of traits, some of which may even conflict, so that their behavior is not necessarily predictable. Round characters are like ‘real people.’ In Matthew’s story, Jesus and the disciples count as round characters” (*Matthew as Story*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988], 10).

22 Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 67.

23 Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 38.

24 Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 50–51.

Table 1.1: Cornelis Bennema's Chart of Character Descriptors

Name of Character	
Narrative appearances	
Origin	Birth, gender, ethnicity, nation/city Family (ancestors, relatives)
Upbringing	Nurture, education
External goods	Epithets,* reputation Age, marital status Socioeconomic status, wealth Place of residence/operation Occupation, positions held Group affiliation, friends
Speech and actions	In interaction with the protagonist In interaction with other characters
Death	Manner of death, events after death
Character analysis	Complexity [i.e., traits] Development Inner life
Character classification	Degree of characterization**
Character evaluation	Response to the protagonist Role in plot
Character significance	Representative value

* "An exalted title for a person or thing; a feature of the high style. Examples are 'the LORD of hosts' as a title for God (Ps. 24:10) and 'Darius the Mede' as a title of the Persian king (Dan. 5:31)" (Leland Ryken, "Glossary of Literary Terms and Genres," in *The Literary Study Bible, English Standard Version* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019], 1979).

** "Characterization," as Kingsbury defines it, "has to do with the way in which an author brings characters to life in a narrative" (*Matthew as Story*, 9).

It is that final question to which we turn next. The goal of the above analysis is "for us to get to know the characters as fully as possible, and then to decide what the author intends us to learn about life

and God on the basis of these characters.”²⁵ For each character we should ask, “Am I like him/her? Should I be like him/her? What of his/her story is mine?”

For example, most Christians easily identify with Peter in his threefold denial of Jesus. But do we identify more with Mary or with Martha? The priest, the Levite, or the good Samaritan? Do we identify more with the grumbling onlookers who are repelled because Jesus has “gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner,” or with Zacchaeus, who joyfully receives Jesus and generously distributes his ill-gotten wealth to those in need? Do we recognize something of Jonah’s unmerciful bigotry in our own ministries? Can we say with the oblivious apostles, after Jesus declared that one of them will betray him, “Is it I, Lord?” Below is an example of how I preached on this point in my opening sermon on the Gospel of Mark:

Mark does not just talk about who Jesus is and what he has done. He also highlights various responses to him. There are wrong responses and right ones. And through the various characters who encounter Jesus, we ourselves enter into the drama. With each character we should ask ourselves, “Should we imitate their response to Jesus or not?”

For example, we should not say about Jesus, as the scribes did, “He is possessed by Beelzebul” (3:22), or join Peter at the

25 Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 68. “Storytellers have *devices of disclosure* by which to guide our assessment of a character’s experiment in living” (Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 117). For example, in Genesis 13, note the outcome (does something positive or negative happen to the character?), point of view (e.g., the narrator of the story of the separation between Abraham and Lot provides a subtle comment about the land which makes Lot look selfish and Abraham sacrificial), and authorial commentary (e.g., the citizens of Sodom “were wicked, great sinners against the LORD,” Gen. 13:13).

transfiguration (9:5) in making Jesus equal with Moses and Elijah (build a tent for each), or follow the rich man in not following Jesus' call (10:17–22), or betray Jesus like Judas did (14:43–46), repeatedly deny Jesus like Peter did (14:66–72), ridicule Jesus as Pilate did (15:9, 26), and mock him like the Roman soldiers (15:16–20), the chief priests, and the scribes (vv. 31–32). But we should follow Jesus like Simon, Andrew, James, and John (1:16–20), and join the leper on our knees before Jesus, saying, “Make me clean” (1:40), and humbly acknowledge, as the father of the demon-possessed boy did, our need for Jesus' help—not only to deliver us from evil but to grow our faith: “We believe; help our unbelief” (see 9:24). We should also see with blind Bartimaeus that Jesus, as the Son of David, is able to cure both physical and spiritual blindness (“Son of David, have mercy on me!”; 10:47), and shout aloud with the crowd, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!” (11:9–10). Yes, indeed. Lord, save us! We should, moreover, like the woman who came with an expensive bottle of perfume, pour out a year's wages upon Jesus (14:3–9), and join in the centurion's cry at the cross, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (15:39).

In 13:14, Mark interjects “Let the reader understand.” But Mark wants his readers not just to understand the Olivet Discourse (where we find that interjection). He wants us to understand who Jesus is, what he has done for us, and how we should respond to him. One way that Mark teaches his readers to respond to Jesus is through key characters—respond like him and her and them.²⁶

26 Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *Mark: Arise and Follow the Son*, forthcoming.

Fifth, as preachers we seek to identify with the characters. “Without sympathetic connection,” Arthurs notes, “the sermon will lack credibility.”²⁷ Here is where I suggest a personal testimony that connects with the themes of the text; in your transparency and vulnerability you will also connect with your congregation.²⁸ For example, in my first sermon in my new calling at Crossway, where I also serve as chaplain, I preached on the sinful woman who anointed Jesus (Luke 7:36–50). Here is how I concluded that brilliant and beautiful story:

With this story laid afresh before us, let me ask you: how will you respond to the grace of God offered in Jesus Christ? Like Simon or like the woman? Like Simon? No. Like the woman? Yes. Have faith in him. Love him. Serve him. And find “peace” and “rest for your souls.”

As a few of you know, I came to Christ as a sexual sinner. I grew up in a devout Roman Catholic home where virginity was prized, and where I was taught to wait for marriage. I strongly believed that. I wanted to live out that conviction. And I did so throughout high school. And as a morally pure teenager—by all outward appearances, that is—I looked down on those who were sexually active. I know it’s not proper Protestantism anymore to compare a devout Roman Catholic with a Pharisee, but I was more like Simon in this story than you might imagine. I went to church each week and on holy days of obligation, prayed the rosary every day in the month of May, fasted throughout Lent, served as an altar

²⁷ Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 92.

²⁸ Le Peau’s advice to writers is true for preachers: “Be vulnerable. Personal stories that show your own weaknesses or mistakes will help your audience identify with you, appreciate you, and open themselves up to what you have to say” (*Write Better*, 64).

boy and Eucharist minister, and was quite seriously considering the monastic life or the priesthood. But then a girl came along. Amazingly, it didn't take much to make me renounce my monkish ways. I lost my virginity. I bought the lie that true love is what justifies sexual intimacy, and if there was ever true love it was this. The feeling of love justified anything and everything I did.

Well, a few months later, my girlfriend told me she was pregnant! At age eighteen my girlfriend was pregnant, and at age nineteen I was the father of a baby boy. And when my boy's mother moved on from me—our true love forever didn't last forever, not even twenty months—God's saving grace moved me toward Christ. I cried—like this woman. Uncontrollably. You should have seen it. You wouldn't have believed the mess. And I prayed, "Jesus, forgive me and clean me up on the inside, for I'm full of lust and pride." And you know what? (The story of salvation hasn't changed.) He forgave me and cleaned me up.

I share that, and I end with that, because I want you to know (as your new chaplain) that when I say—"Be like this woman. Have faith in Christ. Love him. Serve him. Find peace and rest for your souls"—I mean it because I've experienced it. I used to be that, and now I'm this. I've been "washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" from my religious hypocrisy (like Simon) and my sexual sin (like the woman). Listen, God knows that human beings are self-righteous and sexually sinful. But God has not left us to ourselves. He has sent his Son to forgive the debtor, however great your debt. So, Crossway/Good News Publishers, receive afresh the good news of the cross. Come to the feet (and outstretched hands!) of Jesus Christ. Come to the only one who can say to you today and always, "Your sins are forgiven. . . . go in peace."

Reader, listen! A personal story from your life, attached to a biblical narrative, always proves a powerful combination that engages your hearers and often moves them to the desired attitudes, emotions, and actions. Obviously, you cannot and should not do this in every sermon, but you can and should do it, likely more than you do.

Divide the Plot Sequence

In her book on writing fiction, Anne Lamott writes,

Plot grows out of character. . . . Let what they say or do reveal who they are, and be involved in their lives, and keep asking yourself, Now what happens? The development of relationship creates plot. Flannery O'Connor, in *Mystery and Manners*, tells how she gave a bunch of her early stories to the old lady who lived down the street, and the woman returned them saying, "Them stories just gone and shown you how some folks *would* do."²⁹

That is precisely what plot is: it details what characters will up and do.

So, as Ryken rightly admonishes, "Especially important is the process of identifying the action—dividing the story into units and naming them accurately. Doing this pays big dividends when we move [step six, below] from story to theme."³⁰ Dividing a plot sequence into its constituent parts is not like writing a report for a postdoctoral seminar on astrophysics. "Anyone can divide a story into its successive units and identify plot conflicts and formulate an accurate statement of the unifying action of a story. All it takes is

29 Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor, 1994), 52–53.

30 Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 115.

being convinced that these are the right things to do with a story.”³¹ The goal of such division is to produce a simple and seeable outline of the story,³² an exegetical outline that will help serve as the foundation of your homiletical outline. Don’t rush the necessary process:

We should not be in a hurry to get to the religious or moral ideas in a Bible story. . . . In much biblical scholarship, preaching, and Bible study, there is too much time or space devoted to the ideas of the Bible stories and not enough time or space to reliving the story and absorbing the human experiences that are silhouetted with heightened clarity in it.³³

Let the structure and movement of the text inform the structure and flow of the sermon. And as you retell the story in your sermon, don’t take the story out of the story. Keep the plot moving. Don’t often interrupt the retelling with a disruptive illustration, unnecessary application, or unimportant aside.

Move from Story to Theme

For any biblical text, one of the preacher’s main tasks is to grasp and clearly communicate the ideational truth. This task is easy when preaching an epistle. Paul’s proposition is your point. If he writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind,” your two points of exegesis and application are obvious. But what about a story? Biblical stories offer representational truth, where a theme is disclosed through a

31 Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 79.

32 “During the spadework phase of this analysis, it is very useful to draw horizontal lines to divide the sequence into easily seen units” (Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 70).

33 Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work*, 125.

story wherein characters embody realities and the plot illustrates truth. For example, the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) communicates that “God is mightier than the most intimidating champion his enemies can muster and that he blesses those who step out with fearless faith.”³⁴ Or, in the amnesty of Barabbas and sentencing of Jesus (“So Pilate . . . released for them Barabbas . . . and . . . delivered [Jesus] to be crucified,” Mark 15:15), we have the great doctrine of the great exchange in story form.

So, every biblical narrative, like any good story, embodies human experience in such a way as to lead us to relive it along with the characters in the story, but each story also conveys a message or theme. “What is the big idea?” is a question that preachers trained under Haddon Robinson were taught to ask and answer. It is not the only question to ask, but it is an important one, especially as it relates to narratives. Sometimes the big idea is not stated in the text and thus not easily deduced, such as in the story of David and Goliath. (The key, then, is not to allegorize or moralize, but to study, ask learned friends, and pray.) Other times, the narrator himself or a character in his story shares the big idea. This is a big help! Below are four examples where Jesus shares the focused truth of the text:

“. . . know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . .” (Mark 2:10)

“A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown . . .” (Mark 6:4)

“You go, and do likewise.” (Luke 10:37)

³⁴ Arthurs, “Preaching the Old Testament Narratives,” 77.

“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:10)

So, if you preach the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10) as an allegory about how Jesus, as the ultimate Good Samaritan, paid for all our sins, you’ve missed the point; or if in your retelling the story of the conversion of Zacchaeus (Luke 19) you think his seeking after Jesus supersedes Jesus’s seeking of the lost tax collector, you have the two themes backwards. It is this clearly stated, or carefully deduced, big idea that becomes then the main emphasis of the sermon.

Frame within the Context

To effectively preach Bible narratives, it is foundational to set the story within its historical, theological, and literary context. The story of Ruth is understood and properly applied only when we know something of the connection between the historical setting (“In the days when the judges ruled,” Ruth 1:1), Ruth’s bitter tragedy (her husband’s death, 1:5), her sweet marriage to her redeemer Boaz (4:13), and the promise of the Davidic covenant (“she bore a son. They named him Obed. . . . Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David,” 4:13, 17, 22; cf. 2 Samuel 7).

Moreover, following the model of apostolic preaching, we should preach every particular narrative in relation to the Bible’s metanarrative, the story about God and the salvation of his people that spans from creation to new creation. This big story includes “the covenants with Israel and the nations that were given to Abraham, Moses, and David . . . the sending of Jesus the Messiah and his life, death, and resurrection . . . a coming judgment that all people must face,” and the “right response,” namely, “believing in Jesus, which means believing in all that has been said about Jesus.” When we

“preach through any narrative segment of the Bible,” Paul House advises, “preachers should keep this sweeping narrative in mind.”³⁵

Create a Homiletic Outline

How do we put it all together? Whether you preach without notes, with a few Post-its pinned to the pulpit, from a fairly robust outline, or from a full manuscript (the fully sanctified position!), below I offer five arrangements. Each arrangement comes with an example from a recent sermon series that I preached on Mark.

First, follow the story’s plot. Move from disequilibrium to resolution, from problem to solution. When I preached on Mark 9:14–29, I gave two points. (It’s not a sin to give a two-point sermon!) I started, as the story does, with *the problem* (a demon-possessed son and the disciples’ inability to help, vv. 14–24), followed by *the solution* (Jesus’s incredible authority over evil, vv. 25–29). Simple enough.

Second, make a point based on each key character. For example, when I preached on Mark 10:46–52, in my introduction I spoke of the climax of this miracle story: Jesus’s statement to blind Bartimaeus, “Your faith has made you well,” or it could be rendered (as the verb is *sōzō*), “Your faith has saved you.” I went on to say, “Saving faith is a key theme here. But there are other themes, and other lessons to be learned in this short but theologically charged text. And, one way to learn all the lessons is to review the three characters in the story: the ‘blind beggar’ who cries out for help; those who, at first, oppose him (‘his disciples and a great crowd,’ v. 46); and ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ (v. 47), the Savior who restores the man’s sight.” I started, then, with those who opposed the poor

35 Paul House, “Written for Our Example: Preaching Old Testament Narratives,” in *Preach the Word: Essays on Preaching: In Honor of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 36.

man's plea by highlighting the actions and comments from the disciples and the crowd.

Third, use your main applications as points. I have found this strategy successful. Only a small percent of the congregation falls asleep or leaves for the bathroom! You still retell the story. You always retell the story. God forbid you don't retell the story! But you arrange your material to appeal to the "So what?" question that arises in everyone's mind the moment you start your sermon. When I preached Mark 1:21–39, I offered three lessons: we must (1) believe that demons exist and wreak havoc in this world; (2) know that Jesus has come to destroy the works of the devil; and (3) follow Jesus's priorities—prayer and preaching. My sermon on Mark 7:24–37 also featured three lessons: let us be astonished at (1) Jesus's extraordinary authority; (2) the extent of his kingdom; and (3) his eschatological salvation.

Fourth, use key themes to retell the story. Okay, with my example for this suggestion, I move from Mark to Luke, but only because I just preached on Zacchaeus. And besides, variety in writing, as in preaching, is important. Here's my homiletical outline, as I tied it to the text and flow of the story:

Point One	Seeking	"Zacchaeus was <i>seeking</i> to see who Jesus was"
Point Two	Receiving	"he . . . <i>received</i> him [Jesus] joyfully"
Point Three	Pulling ³⁶	"The Son of Man came to <i>seek</i> and to <i>save</i> the lost."

Fifth, be cool like jazz. That is, offer an inducive arrangement. "Don't show the bones" is how I sometimes phrase it. I get the image

³⁶ The word "pulling" is not in the text. I use the image based on the context—a rich man is pulled through the eye of the needle (Luke 18:25).

of the jazz musician from the excellent book my new friend Eric Redmond edited. In Charlie Dates's insightful preface, he writes,

A gift of black preaching to the field of homiletics is its intersection of preaching as science and art. On one hand, preaching has technical elements for exegesis, structure, theological, and doctrinal proclamation. On the other, preaching, like jazz, can move within a structure, an invisible outline, a storytelling that makes the point without necessarily announcing the point. It can invite hearers into the biblical narrative, turn their ears into eyes, and arrest their imagination.³⁷

An invisible outline indeed! Don't show the bones. Jazz musicians know their chord structures, but they don't play them in front of you. They use them skillfully. Beautifully. Go and do likewise! As you are retelling the story, add a few riffs. That is, quote the text, retell it in your own words, add an illustration or an application, and then back to the melodic line. You can assert the application (I'm not against that; see my applications-as-points suggestion above), but sometimes suggestion, not assertion, serves your congregation best.³⁸ As Robinson states, "Narratives are most effective when the audience hears the story and arrives at the speaker's ideas without the ideas being stated directly."³⁹

37 Charlie E. Dates, "Preface: The Treasure and Potential of African American Preaching," in *Say It! Celebrating Expository Preaching in the African American Tradition*, ed. Eric C. Redmond (Chicago: Moody, 2020), 18.

38 See Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 225.

39 Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 130.

See table 1.2 for additional ideas for organizing sermons based on narratives.

Table 1.2: Five More Possible Ways to Organize Homiletical Outlines on Narratives

Geographical shifts	Your outline could follow Jesus's movement: "near to Jerusalem" (Mark 11:1), "on the road" to Jerusalem (v. 8), and entering Jerusalem: "And he entered Jerusalem" (v. 11).
Locations	On the beheading of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14–29), you could serve as a tour guide, taking your congregation from (1) the king's headquarters (2) to the prison (3) to the banquet hall (4) to the tomb.
Scenes and themes	Matthew 26:57–75 records two trials. Thus, it offers a twofold outline. As Jesus is on trial before the Sanhedrin for his messiahship ("Tell us if you are the Christ," v. 63), Peter is on trial before a few servants for his discipleship. (The "now" of verse 69 means that the subsequent events occur "at the same time" as Jesus's trial ["now," v. 59].) Matthew's literary artistry is astounding! As Jesus stands on trial inside the high priest's house before the high-ranking religious authorities in Jerusalem and tells the truth, Peter sits outside and repeatedly lies as lowly servant girls question him. He thrice denies Jesus.

Table 1.2 (*continued*)

Relationship of key words to scenes and themes	<p>Mark 10:13–31 can be preached as a unit, rather than preaching one sermon on Jesus’s interaction with the children (vv. 13–16) and another on the rich man’s encounter with Jesus (vv. 17–31). These texts belong together because Mark uses three key words to connect the two stories: the word “child/ren” (vv. 13, 14, 15, 24, 29, 30), “enter” (vv. 15, 23, 24, 25), and “kingdom of God” (vv. 14, 15, 23, 24, 25, cf. “gospel” of the kingdom [v. 29 with Matt. 4:23]). Yet more important than those three key words are the shared themes found in these two stories, told in three scenes.</p> <p>In scene one, children come to Jesus. He receives them. He blesses them. He offers an object lesson: “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (10:15). That lesson, then, is played out in the next two scenes.</p> <p>In scene two, a rich man approaches Jesus. Does he receive the kingdom like a little child? Put differently, is he willing to be totally dependent on Jesus, a dependence that, in his case, would show itself in absolute self-denial in regards to his great possessions? No, he is not willing.</p> <p>Then, in scene three, Jesus instructs his disciples on the dangers of wealth: “How difficult it will be,” he says, “for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (v. 23). He then reiterates his point: “<i>Children</i> [he calls his disciples], how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!” (v. 24). Then, he gives an exaggerated metaphor to explain just how difficult it is: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (v. 25). The disciples are astonished. They wonder if anyone can enter the kingdom and experience eternal life, ultimate salvation. Next, Jesus talks about the possibility of an impossibility. God alone can save people! Then, Peter makes an interesting statement to Jesus: “See, we have left everything” (v. 28). Is that statement (which represents a reality) an expression of childlike faith?</p>
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Table 1.2 (*continued*)

Questions	An outline for Mark 9:2–13 could be these four questions. First, what does God say here about Jesus? Second, what is the proper response to that revelation? Third, what does Jesus say about his mission? Fourth, what is the proper response to that revelation?
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CONCLUSION

Our goal with this chapter, as with the following chapters, is to equip you with helpful and reliable tools so you might more effectively understand and teach the Bible. And as my coauthor wisely phrases it for every genre, “If the message is embodied in a form, we first need to master the form. The ‘how’ is the door that opens the ‘what’ of the utterance.”⁴⁰ The form in this central chapter is narrative. Aren’t you glad God gave us stories! I love stories. Lee loves stories. You love stories. Your congregation loves stories. The unbelieving world loves stories. Such stories God has given, through his inspired scribes, to shape us! They inspire us to action. Inspire us to evangelize the lost through the only One who came to seek and to save the lost.

BUILD YOUR LIBRARY! HELPFUL RESOURCES

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⁴⁰ Ryken, *Literary Introductions to the Books of the Bible*, 10.

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