

**A HANDBOOK FOR
YOUTH MINISTRY**

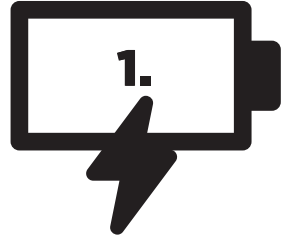


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Clear Communication

LJ Harry

I grew up in a smallish Apostolic church in the country. During services, when we were done singing and dancing, my pastor would place his guitar on its stand, scoop up his Bible, and walk to the pulpit. I knew that was a telltale sign that he was about to preach for forty-five minutes or more. Don't get me wrong; I loved my church, and I loved my pastor. But I didn't love preaching. He often opened his message by saying, "In our text, we read . . ." Instead of taking notes, I usually ended up drawing on the blank pages in the back of my Bible. Some Sunday nights I tilted my head toward the ceiling and tried to follow one ceiling-fan blade around its dizzying, clockwise orbit. Any more than two times around, and the blades became a blur.

I'm ashamed to say it, but it took me a long time to really appreciate preaching. My preteen mind couldn't quite build the bridge from my day to the apostle Paul's day. Those men lived thousands of years before me, and they lived without air conditioning. Who does that? As a young boy drawing in the back of my Bible and watching fan blades spin in circles, I realized the best way to tell His story is through a story. Jesus told stories, and no one communicated more clearly and beautifully. He crafted stories that listeners could easily apply to their lives: He told stories of planting and crops to seed-sowers; He told stories of sheep and predators

to shepherds; He told stories about fishing to fishermen; He told stories of profit and gain to businessmen.

Thankfully, as I grew up, I learned to love hearing preaching because I realized preaching had the power to save my soul. Messages I remember most over thirty years are the ones filled with stories. Communicating with a generation with a short attention span takes work. And creativity. And coffee. Lots of coffee. (And I don't even like coffee.) However, in your efforts to communicate, don't lean on creativity and coffee alone; lean on the leading of God's Spirit. As God's Spirit leads you in the direction He wants you to teach or preach, keep your eyes and ears open for stories that will help you tell His story.

Youth Service and Youth Camp

After graduating from Bible college, my wife Andrea and I loaded up our 1991 Dodge Spirit and a U-Haul and headed to our first ministry: the happiest place on earth. Pastor and Shawna Hobson had invited us to be their youth pastor in Longwood, Florida, just north of Orlando. Could life get any better? I had big plans for our youth group. Within weeks (I thought) we were going to storm the schools and double the youth group. Maybe we could use the sanctuary on Sundays and the adults could meet in the fellowship hall. Maybe we would need a bigger building!

Those few weeks turned into a few months, and I began to realize youth ministry was harder than I thought. Several Fridays on the way to youth service, we would drive by a corner 7-Eleven store. Peering through the glass, I would think, *You're lucky. All you have to do is stand behind a counter and sell Snickers bars. I'm going to try imparting eternal truth to seventh graders who want to stick pencils up their nose.* I wanted every youth service to feel like a youth camp service. It didn't. Later than sooner, I eased up on the self-imposed pressure to "tear it up" and viewed every youth service as another board in the bridge to move our students closer to Jesus.

I discovered you don't have to wow your students when you speak. Just feed them the Word of God. They may not remember most of your messages, but those messages will give them the spiritual strength they need when they need it. For example, Steven was a young guy in our youth group. One day the call came to visit one of our precious senior ladies in the hospital. I called Steven and took him with me to the hospital. On the way back, we stopped at the Ferrari/Maserati dealership and drooled over the millions of dollars' worth of Ferraris and Maseratis that were within arm's reach but out of the reach of my youth-pastor salary.

I later learned that Steven's most cherished memories of my youth ministry were not, for instance, the sermons when I exegeted the seals, trumpets, and vials of Revelation. One of his fondest memories was the time we visited the hospital and then the Ferrari/Maserati showroom. His other fond memory was when I fell backward off the stool during youth class.

"Communication" entails more than transmitting information in such a way that is readily and clearly understood; communication also means to be joined or connected with one another. Communicating with students outside of the pulpit or podium will help make a connection when you try to communicate with them from behind the pulpit. Spend time with your students just living life. And when it's time to communicate what God wants them to hear, they will be more likely to care about Him because you showed them you care about them. When they know that Jesus and you care, it's time to communicate His story. Because ultimately, we know there is no replacement for the preached and taught Word of God.

Hook, Book, Look, Took

It's a sunny Saturday afternoon. You're sitting near a window through which you can see everyone running to get frozen custard while you're staring at the blinking cursor on a blank Word document. It would be easier to leap the Grand Canyon with a pogo

stick than to fight that blank screen and blinking cursor. Don't give in to the temptation to get frozen custard. Stick with your study. God has given you an eternal truth to share with your students, but your job is to discover a good way to share it. Here's one good way to craft a message or lesson that will communicate from your notes to their hearts. It's not the only good way, but it is a way worth mentioning. It is called "Hook, book, look, took." Before you type out eternal truth, you need a guide, something to keep you on track so you don't find yourself chasing theological rabbits.

Let's do a little lab work. This Sunday, God has burdened your heart for students who have walked away from Him. You know a perfect story in Scripture to tell this story: the Prodigal Son of Luke 15. Now that you have direction for what to communicate, let's work on the guide. Some call it a theme, a topic statement, or a thesis statement. Thanks to my college professor, I call it the 3:00 AM test.

The 3:00 AM Test

If I were to call you Sunday morning at 3:00 AM to ask what you're going to preach, you should be able to tell me in one sentence. Even without a shot of espresso, you should have distilled your message well enough to reduce it to one sentence. If you can say, "You can come back to Jesus even if you've walked away from Him," you have passed the 3:00 AM test. You know what you're going to communicate, and so will your students. But if you answer, "Well, you know. The prodigal son ran away, taking his portion of his father's inheritance. The elder brother didn't do anything about it, but maybe he should have. The father was heart-broken, but he didn't chase after his younger son. There might be something . . . Hello? Hello?"

You get the picture. The 3:00 AM test serves to ensure your subject is broad enough to be universal but narrow enough to be memorable. When your students think about that service, they should

be able to get close to capturing your 3:00 AM sentence. Now that we have our guide, let's craft our message.

Hook

The first section is the *hook*: the introduction. *Time* magazine published an article in 2015, "You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span Than a Goldfish," that clocked the average attention span of humans at eight seconds. Theoretically, that means we have to capture their attention in the first seven seconds. Some people can't even close their Bible and take their seat in seven seconds. Crafting this introduction can be a lot of fun, but it also can generate a fair amount of frustration. We are not preaching to entertain, but our aim is to open in such a way that invites everyone listening to continue listening. Many times your students will grade how interesting your message will be by how interesting your introduction is. If you open with, "In our text, we read . . ." your students may start scrolling through their social media feed. Avoid opening by reading a dictionary definition of your topic or statistics related to it. Start as Jesus often did; start with a story.

When I first went to college, I started stacking up books to help me be a better preacher. I bought one of the biggest study Bibles I could find. I bought a Strong's concordance so I could mispronounce words from the Hebrew and Greek languages. I bought a one-volume commentary for \$19.95. And I bought a massive lift-with-your-legs-not-with-your-back illustrations book so I could tell heart-wrenching, tear-jerking stories to draw sobbing people to the altar. Some illustrations soared; some fell flat. But all of them were someone else's story.

After I lived a few more years and preached a few more places, I started sharing some stories of my own: I ran away from home when I was around seven years old. My mother took her freeze-dried dog to the veterinarian, complaining that her dog never barks anymore. When my bride-to-be met my mother for the first time, my mom came to the airport dressed in a full reindeer costume,

head to hoof. I drove my brand-new bride over nineteen hours out of the way on our honeymoon because I took the wrong road. These stories form the foundation of great introductions because they keep the audience interested enough to listen to the story that can change their life and save their soul.

No doubt you have some great stories in your own life you could share for openers that will reel in your audience's attention. Nothing tears down walls between you and your audience like a personal story. Personal stories let your audience, especially a younger audience, know you are a person like they are, not "just a preacher." If you were born many years before they were, they may feel you can't relate to them. But if you allow yourself to be vulnerable and let them know you are a regular person, these stories can build a bridge to them that an illustration from a book just can't build.

Talking about yourself can feel like tiptoeing on a tightrope. You don't want to fall off one side into bragging about yourself, but neither do you want to fall off the other side into embarrassing yourself. Speaking of embarrassment, never embarrass someone during an illustration. If you're going to mention someone, clear it with the person beforehand. A young man was preaching a short sermon one Sunday and mentioned his mom being in debt "up to her eyebrows." That made for a quiet ride home. The Golden Rule still rules the day: Do unto others (as you tell their story) as you would have them do unto you.

For our message on the prodigal, let's start like this: "I ran away once. Mom and Dad were forcing us to do our *homework*, then they had the nerve to ask us to help with *housework*. We were promised life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, not tyranny. So before I was nine years old, my sister and I ran away together." Just like us rookie runaways, this message is off and running.

Book

The hook of the message is not the message: it's just the appetizer to let your audience know the main course is on the way. This next section is called the *book*. It's aptly named because now we connect the opening illustration to the Bible. To transition well, you need a transition statement. This statement bridges our world with the biblical world. We may not be able to relate to a first-century young man in a robe riding a horse from home to a faraway country, but we can relate with running away. Our statement may sound like this: "I'm not the only one to run away from home. He ran away too. We don't know why he ran or even who he was. We just know him as the prodigal son."

Here we stand at the meat of the message, and we have bridged two worlds with one transition statement. This *book* section will demand the most time in your message because the Word of God—not our illustrations or stories—is anointed. Here we do our best to bring the Word of God alive as we speak. This section requires diligent study and preparation. Read through the story again. And again. And again. Read the story's context: Luke 14 and Luke 16. Read the passage in a different translation. Read books on the Book of Luke or books on the prodigal son himself. Read commentaries on Luke 15. Learn as much as you can about the customs, the culture, and the world in which the prodigal lived. Like a seasoned chef, you probably won't throw all the ingredients into this message, but you will have answers if someone asks questions afterward.

The setting for your service will help determine how much groundwork you need to lay. If this is a class of faithful, Spirit-filled, Spirit-led students, you may not need to lay as much groundwork as you would at a youth rally with students new to the Bible. Sometimes, you will not know how much your audience already knows, so it is best to tell as much of the story as necessary to give context to your audience so no one is left behind. Be wary of saying, "You all know the story," because they may not all know the story. As

much as possible, stay in one Bible story for each message. Every Bible story you introduce needs a proper introduction.

One preacher I like to listen to was preaching one Sunday night. He wanted to show that the point he was making was a theme throughout the Bible. By the time he gave the altar call, he had alluded to fourteen different Bible stories. In my mind, Noah crossed the Red Sea with three hundred animals who lapped up water like a lion from Revelation. If you're preaching about the prodigal son and want to compare him to backsliding Israel, you have to explain who Israel was, why she was backsliding, if she returned to God, and how God responded. If you introduce a new story, you have to work hard to keep from confusing your audience. Keep communication clear. Keep communication simple. Stay in one story if possible.

Look

Now we come to the application part of the message. It's great to know that the prodigal returned to his father, but how does that help us? No one in your audience may have run away from home, but perhaps they have run away from God. How does this Bible story apply to the story God is writing in their lives? That's the name of this section: the *look*. This applies the Bible story we have just shared. Someone in the Bible fought the very battles we fight; some of them won, some lost—and we can learn from both. So how does this biblical principle from their day look when it's lived out in our day?

Sometimes you will apply the message throughout your sermon to remind your audience this really does matter to them. Sometimes you will wait until the end and bring the full weight of the story to bear as they walk with you from the beginning through the conflict and into the resolution. Here, we might say, "Just like the prodigal came home to his father, you can come home to our Father. No matter how far you went or what you did while you

were away, you can come home. And He wants you—we want you—to come home.”

After people have been listening for a while, their attention starts to drift. They find themselves at Chipotle with a burrito in one hand and chips in the other. Just before opening up an altar call, consider adding one more illustration to bring everyone back. This is sometimes called a commercial. It’s a quick break from the Bible story to a current story to bring people back to the here and now. Sometimes that illustration springboards off the opening illustration. If you didn’t share the end of your opening illustration, this is a great time to lift the suspense and finish the story.

Years ago, my family and I were flying out of Columbus, Ohio, bound for the Arkansas youth camp. It was a long flight, and we all know that dry-roasted peanuts and a can of Cran-Apple juice isn’t enough to feed a family of three. I sent Andrea and our daughter ahead to the gate while I went back to order a pizza. The pizza cost too much and took too long for my taste, but we were hungry. By now the plane was preboarding. Plenty of time. Then general boarding. Still enough time. Then final boarding. Running out of time! Our pizza had not yet begun to bake. What’s a hubby to do? You could cut the suspense with a pizza cutter.

When I shared that story at the beginning of a message, I left the audience there in the airport at the Wolfgang Puck counter, wondering if I had waited for the pizza or if I had run to the plane. I transitioned into the *book* section of the message. Just before asking them to stand, I finished the story. Sometimes, it’s good to add a commercial break just to make sure your audience is still with you before you get ready to close the message and open the altar.

Took

This is the section you’ve been building toward during the entire message. What will your audience take away from what you just preached? What do you want them to do after hearing this word from the Lord? There are several ways to close. You may ask

them to stand as you simply wrap up what you just preached. You may finish the unfinished parts of the Bible story, or you may share one more story that drives your condensed point home one more time. But remember this: when you're closing, close. If you put the landing gear down, land, baby, land.

Be careful not to talk them out of conviction or encouragement. It is possible for God to be tugging on someone's heart but we keep talking until they weary of standing and conviction lifts. Be careful not to introduce a brand-new story or principle, especially with brand-new people. Keep your conclusion very simple and very short.

Now, give the *took*. What do you want them to do? Do you want them to:

- pray for themselves
- pray for each other
- pray for the lost; reach the lost
- give their tithes and offerings, or
- march around a wall for six days and shout on the seventh?

The *took* gives them specific steps they can take at the end of the service plus steps they can take when they get home to apply this message. Be clear what you want them to do. Don't be afraid if there is a lull as you make an altar call. Sometimes it takes time for the first student to respond, then others will follow.

What is our *took* for the prodigal son message? We want them to know they can return to Jesus by praying in the altar, and both He and we will welcome them. We also want them to pray for others who have walked away from Jesus. Now that you've given them specific steps on what they should do, let them do it. Pray with them. Pray for them. Don't keep talking into the microphone, telling another story or making another point. It's difficult for them to

listen to God while they're still trying to listen to you. You've done what you can do; now it's time to let God do what only He can do.

In case you're wondering, I stayed at the counter to wait for the pizza. In case you're really wondering, I barely made it on the plane. In case you're really, really wondering, it was pretty good pizza.

Takeaway Points

- (1) **Hook.** This is the opening of the message, giving your audience a reason to listen longer. The hook is often an illustration or story to tie into the biblical segment which follows. The hook of the message is not the message: it's just the appetizer to let your audience know the main course is on the way.
- (2) **Book.** This is the biblical segment which follows the hook. It's aptly named because now we connect the opening illustration to the Bible. Here we do our best to bring the Word of God alive as we speak. This section requires especially diligent study and preparation. Read through the story again. And again. And again.
- (3) **Look.** This is the application of the message. This answers why the audience should care about the story you are sharing. Sometimes you will apply the message throughout to remind your audience this really does matter to them. Sometimes you will wait until the end and bring the full weight of the story to bear as they walk with you from the beginning through the conflict and into the resolution.
- (4) **Took.** This is what you've been building toward the entire time. What will your audience take away from what you just spoke? What do you want them to do after hearing this word from the Lord? Be clear in what you believe God is calling them to do.