

EXPOSITORY STUDYING



A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO PREPARING
EXPOSITORY SERMONS

JOEL JAMES

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A Practical Guide To Preparing Expository Sermons

by

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DEDICATION:

To my parents

To Dad for teaching me the craftsman's ethic. To Mom for being editor-in-chief on all my writing projects. To both of you for teaching me to love Christ and His church.

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CHAPTER ONE

PREACHING FOR GOD

My father is a carpenter with a mania for boards that are straight, corners that are square, and joints that fit perfectly. I will never forget the summer we built a stoop on the side of our house (he built; I fetched nails, screws, and tools as needed). When we came to the end of the project, to his horror my father discovered that one side of the stoop didn't fit perfectly against the house. There was a gap of about one centimeter between the two, and to him it looked as wide as the Zambezi River at flood.

My dad would rather nail his thumb to a board than build something that is crooked, so he looked at me and wailed, "How can it not fit? I'm *sure* I built it straight." I replied, "It's not a big deal, Dad, no one will ever see it." Dumb comment. In my father's estimation, all carpenters who excuse shoddy workmanship by mumbling, "No one will ever see it," should be chopped into small pieces and fed to crocodiles.

Realizing I wasn't going to be much help, I went into the house to read while my father set about the task of discovering just how the offending centimeter had come into existence. About half an hour later, he came in the back door with a wide grin on his face. "The house is crooked," he burst out. "That's why it doesn't fit." All was right in his world again. The gap was still there, of course, but it wasn't his fault; his stoop was straight, and that was all that mattered.

Unfortunately my father didn't pass on any of his building skills to me. I confess, I am an abject failure when it comes to carpentry. But what he did pass on was a craftsman's standard: a love for precision and a delight in excellence for excellence's sake. My father works with wood; I work with God's words, but we both have a passion for cutting it straight.

It was exactly that passion for quality workmanship that Paul hoped to kindle in Timothy, his son in the faith, when he wrote, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

That last phrase can be translated, *cutting straight* the word of truth. Paul also liked corners that are square and joints that fit perfectly. As a tentmaker, Paul worked with leather, not wood (Acts 18:3), but as with my father, precision must have been the hallmark of all Paul's labor. And Paul prodded Timothy to adopt that craftsman-like regard for accuracy when it came to interpreting the Bible.

You and I are just as responsible to be craftsmen cutting straight the word of God as Timothy was in the first century. Why? Because when you and I stand up to preach, we are doing something incredibly important. We are preaching for God.

THE PREACHING GOD

God is a preacher. According to the Old Testament, God's lips did not fall silent when He finished speaking the stars, planets, earth, and mankind into existence. God kept on speaking, and when He spoke, usually He was preaching. The most dramatic example of God's preaching was when He uttered the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai. Sinai was the greatest open-air preaching event in the history of the world. After two days of preparation, nearly two million people crowded around the base of the mountain, careful to respect the boundary lines set by Moses—approaching the holy God too closely meant sure death for man or beast. But who could preach to a congregation of two million people? Only God.

And preach He did. The mountain was the pulpit; the sermon had ten points. God Himself was the preacher, speaking to His trembling congregation in an awesome divine voice. Is it any wonder that the people stood at a distance and begged that in the future God speak to them through Moses? When God preaches, He preaches with power!

In the centuries that followed Sinai, God continued to preach—not in an audible divine voice, but through the faithful voices and inspired messages of the prophets. In fact, Jeremiah said that God rose early each morning, diligently, faithfully, perseveringly sending His prophets to Israel. When the people refused to heed the chiding, pleading voices of the prophets, God

lamented, "They did not listen to Me" (Jer 7:26). God preached at Sinai; He continued to preach through the prophets.

When God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, came in human flesh, the Father was still preaching. The apostle John called Jesus *the Word* in John 1:1. It is within the bounds of the word *logos* to say that John called Jesus *the Sermon*. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son..." (Heb 1:1-2). God is a preaching God, and Jesus Christ is His greatest sermon.

In Jesus Christ, God was still the God of Sinai—a preaching God. One of my treasured glimpses of Jesus' ministry is the Sermon on the Mount: a simply dressed carpenter surrounded by the grass, flowers, rocks, and birds of Galilee, proclaiming His authoritative divine law to a host of listeners. It was quieter than Sinai; it wasn't as dramatic as Sinai. There was no fire, smoke, earth tremors, or blinding glory as at Sinai, but once again the pulpit was a mountain, the subject was God's law, and God Himself, the second person of the Trinity, was the preacher. In fact, Jesus highlighted the importance of His preaching ministry when He said, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for" (Mark 1:38).

PREACHING FOR GOD

God preached *then*, but is He still preaching *today*? He is, for He remains the preaching God. In our era God doesn't preach in an audible voice as He did at Sinai. Neither does He preach by means of inspired, revelatory messages as He did during the days of the Old Testament prophets. In our era, God preaches through faithful men who proclaim His word, the Bible. When a preacher today accurately preaches God's written word, it is as if God speaks again. It is no chance occurrence that the command, "Preach the word," comes only three verses after "All Scripture is inspired by God..." (2 Tim 4:2; 3:16). Inspiration means that every time we open our mouths and accurately preach the Bible, it is as if God were preaching.

If we faithfully preach God's word, God's voice is heard; if we don't, it isn't. That is one of the reasons I preach: God must have a voice. God *must* be heard. I would not choose me to be His

voice; I would not choose any man to be God's voice. But if the sovereign, all-powerful, preaching God has chosen to employ men as His lips and larynx, then I echo Isaiah's humble, "Here I am Lord; send me."

How startling that God should use men—even saved, Christ-loving men—to be His voice. But God's wisdom infinitely excels our own. God received glory when He preached at Sinai in an earthquake-like voice, but He receives even more glory when He preaches through the feeble, chirping voices of insignificant, insect-like men. How so? Anyone can cut down a tree with a sharp axe, but only an exceptionally strong man can cut down a tree with a dull axe. When God uses the dull axe of human preachers to chop down the trees of sin and unbelief, His glory is doubled. It proves the incomparable strength of His arm.

STUDYING FOR GOD

Preaching for God—what a noble task! One can understand Martin Luther's outburst, "If I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher."¹ To speak for God is a greater task than ruling a kingdom. But what if you get it wrong? What if, when you preach for God, you preach inaccurately, incorrectly? What if you say something God *didn't* say?

If God is going to use your lips to preach His sermons, you had better get it right. Oh, for direct revelation! The prophets were assured of speaking exactly what God said because He put His words in their mouths in the same way He inspired the Scripture: "Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21; cf. Jer 1:9). But we are not revelatory preachers.

Is there, then, no hope of preaching God's words? Of course there is hope—even certainty. The doctrine of inspiration means that every time you open your Bible, interpret it correctly, and explain it accurately, you are preaching God's very words—a sermon God Himself would preach. God's voice is heard when you *repreach* what God already preached through the pens of men like Moses, Isaiah, Matthew, Paul, and Peter.

¹ Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983), 39, quoted in John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000), 86.

It is a grand privilege to preach for God, but to preach for God you must first *study* for God. Paul told Timothy to "Preach the word" (2 Tim 4:2), but Timothy could only fulfill that command after he had fulfilled this one: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). In Africa, we are often guilty of violating Paul's instruction—much preaching has no workman-like study behind it. We might preach loudly, we might preach for an hour, we might preach so that people are moved, but if we have not explained God's words with such accuracy that God would claim our sermons as His own, then we have not preached for God. Today, God preaches only when men like you and me faithfully rephrase the living, boiling, bubbling, powerful, divine words of the Bible.

Here then is the question: What study method can you use to guarantee you will preach sermons that resay what God said? In a sense no man can preach for God: Methuselah is not old enough; Solomon is not wise enough. But if you study in such a way that your sermons resay what God said in the Bible, then you become God's voice. To say it another way, *expository preaching* requires *expository studying*.

Preparing your sermons in such a way that you resay what God said is a demanding process. But whether you are studying from the original languages (which is best) or from your English, Zulu, Sotho, or Swahili Bible, the study process you'll learn in this book will produce clear, biblical sermons—sermons that explain and apply God's very words.

BLOCK DIAGRAMMING

The study method I want to teach you is called *block diagramming*. It's an approach to studying the Bible that makes you think about each individual piece of the text and about the text as a whole. It forces you to discover what God said, which is the key to preaching for God.

Sermons will differ from preacher to preacher, from church to church, and from culture to culture. A sermon that works well in my Western church in Pretoria might not work so well in a village church. African congregations usually prefer more repetition, more volume, and more

passion than Western congregations. That's perfectly acceptable; expository preaching does have cultural components. But what cannot change, regardless of the setting, is a commitment to resaying what God said. If you don't do that, then you have not preached for God. Therefore, all preachers, regardless of their culture, must study in a way which produces sermons that allow God to speak. Preparing sermons from a block diagram is a great way to do that.

What is a block diagram? It's a way of arranging the words of Scripture on a page so that you can discover the meaning of a passage. For example, Genesis 1:1 can be diagrammed this way:

God created the heavens and the earth

 in the beginning

Can you see *who* created, *what* He created, and *when* He created it? The block diagram shows you exactly what the passage is about; it reveals God's mind based on the words He used. When you preach Genesis 1:1, if you preach the *who*, *when*, and *what* of creation, you have repreached God's words.

Is block diagramming hard work? Sure it is. Imagine a shepherd standing at the mouth of a deep well surrounded by his flock of thirsty sheep. Their bleating voices call urgently for the well's life-sustaining water. To get at the water, the shepherd has to lower a bucket into the well on the end of a rope, fill it, and then pull the bucket back up. Only by means of raw hands and a straining back can he keep his anxious sheep from dying of thirst.

That's what studying to preach for God is like. God's word is the well that yields the water of life. You, the preacher, cannot give your congregation sand; you must give them water—God's water. Therefore, every week you lower the bucket of your mind deep into the Bible. You fill your bucket as you study, and then pull it up hand-over-hand.

The stagnant pool of human wisdom lies near at hand. It's easy for a preacher to dip his bucket there—it takes virtually no work at all—but that water will poison the sheep. If you want pure water, you'll have to lower and raise your bucket into the Bible, a diligent workman handling

accurately the word of truth. If you are faithful to do so, on Sunday God will have a voice; as you preach His words, God will speak again. That's how God, the preaching God, preaches today. Luther was right. It *is* better to be a preacher than a king, but to preach for God you must first study for God.

CHAPTER TWO

GRAIN NOT STRAW: THE KIND OF PREACHING GOD LIKES

Like all Christians, African believers urgently need Bible teaching. But too rarely do our preachers actually explain the text of Scripture in their sermons. More commonly, the preacher reads a text before the sermon, and then dismisses it from the room as if it were a child too young to contribute to what follows. Instead of explaining God's words, the preacher mixes a dangerous homemade brew of his own vaguely biblical ideas, sweetens his concoction with a few stories, and completes the recipe by adding a heavy dose of passion to make it intoxicating. If uncertain of what to say next, he interjects an enthusiastic "Amen?" or "Hallelujah!" and while the congregation responds, he scrambles to come up with his next idea.

God is gloriously majestic and utterly authoritative: He can't be pleased when His words are virtually ignored during the sermon. In fact, when comparing the relative value of human words and His words, God asked, "What does straw have in common with grain?" (Jer 23:28). Not much. Grain is what you put in the feed box; straw is what you scatter on the stable floor. Which option will you choose? Will you explain God's words or will you scatter the chaff of human ideas?

A friend of mine was once asked, "What did you do before you learned to preach expository sermons?" He replied sheepishly, "I made a lot of noise." He wasn't preaching God's word, but since his straw-scattering was done with enthusiasm, people listened. While there is nothing wrong with preaching with a loud voice, there is something drastically wrong when a preacher teaches his own vague ideas about God and Christ rather than the Bible's authoritative words about God and Christ.

In fact, God said that it is an "appalling and horrible thing" when spiritual leaders rule on their own authority instead of teaching His words (Jer 5:30-31). Ultimately, God rejects all preachers who teach their words instead of His own: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets

who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination.... But if they had stood in My council, then they would have announced My words to My people" (Jer 23:16, 22).

A preacher who chooses to preach his own ideas rather than God's words in the Bible, opts for a stone rather than bread, a serpent rather than a fish, straw rather than grain. To such men the prophet Isaiah trumpets: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn" (Isa 8:20). God's words are grain; God's words are light. A preacher speaks a valuable message only when he reprepaches God's words: the Bible.

EXPOSITORY PREACHING

Preaching that reprepaches God's words is called *expository* preaching. The word *exposition* means "a detailed explanation of something."² You've probably heard a lot of sermons that weren't a detailed explanation of anything. It's time to change that trend. In the words of John MacArthur, to preach expositively means to preach "in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented *entirely* and *exactly* as it was intended by God."³ Expository preaching is resaying what God said.

Nehemiah 8 records a classic biblical example of this kind of preaching. When Nehemiah took up his commission as governor of the Persian province of Judah in 444 BC, the most obvious need in Judah was to rebuild and repopulate Jerusalem. Not so obvious (but far more urgent) was the need to rebuild the hearts of the people. For that task, bricks and mortar would not do; God's word was needed.

Ezra was the brick mason recruited by Nehemiah to rebuild the people's hearts. Nehemiah 8 records Ezra's preaching with three critical repetitions: to *call out* or *read aloud* (4x), *the book of the Law* (4x), and to *understand* or *discern* (9x). Nehemiah's summary came in 8:8, "[They] read

² *Webster's New World Dictionary*, 2nd College ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), s.v. "Exposition."

³ John MacArthur, Jr., "The Mandate of Biblical Inerrancy: Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, John MacArthur, Jr. and The Master's Seminary Faculty (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), 23-24, emphasis original.

from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading." Ezra and his fellow preachers read the text and explained the text, so that God's people would understand and live the text. That's expository preaching. And God used it. After Ezra and his helpers preached, the people broke the bonds of nine hundred years of disobedience by celebrating the Feast of Booths for the first time since the days of Joshua (8:13-17).

This is the same kind of preaching that Paul exhorted Timothy to employ in 1 Timothy 4:13: "Until I come, give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching." What was the procedure? Timothy was to read the Bible out loud so that all could hear. Then he was to explain it clearly and to encourage his listeners to obey it.

More than any other style of preaching, expository preaching puts the congregation in direct contact with God's words, and that's where the power is. God's words "give the wisdom that leads to salvation" (2 Tim 3:15); they produce godly living: "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth" (John 17:17).

Sermons that do not focus on explaining and applying God's words are powerless sermons. A fire has no power to warm you if you sit far from it, but if you move close to the flames, the warmth goes right through you. In the same way, when a preacher keeps Christ's people far from the fire of God's word by not explaining the text of Scripture in his sermons, the people freeze to death. But when a preacher draws his people close to the Bible with explain-the-text, expository preaching, they are warmed and made spiritually alive.

Only God's words can save sinners and sanctify saints. Unbelief is a hardy weed: it will not wither and die at the sound of the preacher's voice. Satan is a strong prince: he does not tremble when the preacher tells his entertaining stories. If the preacher has a powerful personality and a dominating delivery, his congregation will momentarily forsake their sinful passions when steamrolled by his Sunday onslaughts. However, once out of earshot, their selfish desires will return as strong as ever, and they will remain unchanged. On the other hand, God's words are infinitely greater than the preacher's words. They uproot the weed of unbelief. They unnerve the prince of darkness. They restrain the passions of self.

HOW TO FEED HORSES

When I was young, my parents owned several horses. In the winter, because of the intense cold, my father fed those horses grain to keep them fat and strong. Needless to say, the horses loved it. They would crowd around my father, their agile, slobbery lips eagerly devouring the grain out of his hand. Horses, however, are pretty smart creatures. They quickly observed that when my father's hand was empty, he would reach into the feed bucket he held in his other hand to get a second helping. Seeing this, the horses learned to ignore his outstretched right hand with its meager offering of grain: contemptuously brushing past it, they plunged their noses directly into the feed bucket held in his left hand. Why be content with a snack when you can have the whole meal?

As a preacher, never hold the Bible in one hand and feed your people from the other. Feed them directly from the hand that holds the Bible, from the Bible itself. Don't give them a palmful of kernels in your sermon; plunge their noses directly into the corn and oats of God's word. That's what expository preaching is about: Stop scattering straw, and give God's people grain!

THE GRAVITATIONAL PULL OF THE BIBLE

Only a fool would try to teach the mind of God without using the words God Himself spoke. John Piper rightly rebukes preachers who take their theology and their sermons from God's word in some vague, disconnected way.

One of the biggest problems I have with younger preachers I am called on to critique is that they fail to quote the texts that support the points they are making... We need to get people to open their Bibles and put their fingers on the text. Then we need to quote a piece of our text and explain what it means. Tell them which half of the verse it is in. People lose the whole drift of a message when they are groping to find where the pastor's ideas are coming from.⁴

⁴ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 41.

Your sermons should revolve around your text as faithfully as the earth revolves around the sun; your words must never escape the gravitational pull of God's words. When your listeners see that your sermons come right out of the Bible, they will start to trust you: in your sermons God's word is king. Furthermore, they will start to read their own Bibles. Expository preaching tends to produce Bereans—believers who search the Scriptures daily to see if these things are true (Acts 17:11).

Good preachers allow God's words to dominate their sermons as a potter's hands dominate the clay. In the words of Walter Kaiser, "The whole objective ... is to let the Scriptures have the major, if not the only, role in determining the shape, logic, and development of our message."⁵ How many sermons have you heard (or preached) that failed to hit that target? If the connection between the text read and the sermon preached is fuzzy at best and nonexistent at worst, God will not claim your sermon as His own. If you want to preach for God, you must prepare your sermons in such a way that God's words shape them like clay. That's what this book is about.

⁵ Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 160.

CHAPTER THREE

IS THE BIBLE SUNSHINE OR FOG?

Before we learn how to block diagram a passage of Scripture, we need to answer two preliminary questions:

- Is the Bible an understandable message from God?
- If it is, how should we interpret it?

A few years ago the governing board of a major evangelical seminary in the United States appointed a new seminary president. Unfortunately, many of the lecturers at that seminary no longer believed or taught the biblical truths championed by the seminary's doctrinal statement. Therefore, the president's first job was to clean house theologically; the liberal lecturers had to be weeded out.

The new president took a direct approach to his assignment. He met with every lecturer and gave him or her the option to sign the doctrinal statement in good faith or to resign. When confronted with those two alternatives, one of the lecturers replied coldly, "I can make that doctrinal statement mean anything I want." The president calmly responded, "You're fired." The lecturer retorted, "You can't fire me. I have tenure at this school, and my contract says that because of that, you can't fire me." To which the president replied, "I can make that contract mean anything I want."

That lecturer wanted communication to be unclear only when it was convenient for her. She believed that God's word and her school's doctrinal statement could be interpreted a dozen different ways, but when it came to the contract that protected her salary, she demanded an accurate, literal, grammatical, historical, objective interpretation. She refused to give God what she demanded for herself and her contract.

We cannot accept such double standards. Every day we rightly assume that accurate, understandable, one-meaning communication is possible in the human realm. It is equally possible when God speaks.

Is the Bible sunshine or fog? Light or darkness? Clear or obscure? As a preacher, can you open your Bible expecting (with some hard work) to understand what God said? Is it possible to find *God's* meaning when you study the Bible? There are at least seven reasons why you can be confident that the Bible has one clear meaning for all people everywhere, and therefore, can be interpreted and preached objectively and accurately.

1) THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN TO REVEAL TRUTH, NOT TO HIDE IT

The Bible itself says that God revealed the Scripture so that men and women can read it, understand it, and obey it. David wrote, "The law of the Lord is perfect ... making wise the simple" (Ps 19:7). The Bible was written to make clear, not to confuse. In Isaiah God said, "I have not spoken in secret, in some dark land" (Isa 45:19); God spoke to be heard and understood. Just before his death, Moses assured Israel that they would not have to make a special trip to heaven or sail far across the sea to discover and obey God's commands. God's mind was publicly and understandably revealed in His law.

For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?" But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it (Deut 30:11-14).

God gave the Bible to be understood and obeyed; therefore, while interpreting the Bible is a difficult task, it is not an impossible one.⁶ His purpose for speaking was to make wise the simple, to reveal truth, not to hide it.

⁶ Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing 1994, 2002), 38-39.

2) GOD IS BOTH CREATOR AND COMMUNICATOR

A second reason you can come to the Bible expecting to find a clear, understandable message is *God is both Creator and Communicator*.⁷ The same God who created you also spoke the Bible. A Communicator who created the listeners to whom He speaks can speak in a way that they can understand. David wrote, "O Lord, You have searched me and known me ... [You] are intimately acquainted with all my ways" (Ps 139:1, 3). The God who knows human beings and all their ways that intimately can write a message they can understand.

3) INSPIRATION GUARANTEES AN ACCURATE MESSAGE

You can also expect to discover God's message when you study the Bible because *inspiration guarantees an accurate message*. The Bible is not a pond disturbed by a pebble—too full of ripples to reflect God's mind accurately. It is a mirror that reflects God's mind precisely, right down to the very words.

In 1 Corinthians 2:10-13 Paul outlines four steps of divine inspiration that guarantee the Bible's accuracy.⁸ Before God the Father revealed His thoughts, He first thought those thoughts. And since God knows everything and never lies, His thoughts are always absolutely true. Paul said that God the Holy Spirit then searched and understood the Father's thoughts: "God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God" (2:10). Since He is fully God, the Holy Spirit knows the Father's infinite thoughts with infinite precision.

But how did God's thoughts come to be written? In the third step, the Spirit delivered God's thoughts to men: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God" (2:12a). This established a direct pipeline from God to Paul. The very same Spirit who searched and understood God's thoughts delivered those thoughts intact to Paul. There were no human middlemen to garble, confuse, or distort the message.

⁷ Francis Schaeffer, *He is There and He is Not Silent* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972), 72. In this vein, Schaeffer writes, "We are not surprised to find that there is a correlation between the observer and the observed because God made them to go together."

⁸ Walter Kaiser, Jr., "A Neglected Text in Bibliology Discussions: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (Spring 1981): 302-319.

In the fourth step of inspiration, Paul spoke or wrote that God-thought, Spirit-delivered message. To make sure that Paul reflected God's mind with complete accuracy, the Holy Spirit taught Paul which words to use: "...we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those [i.e., those *words*] taught by the Spirit" (2:13a, cp. 2 Pet 1:20-21). God's revelation was given in such a way that each prophet or author of Scripture used his own vocabulary and communication style when speaking or writing. However, the words Paul and the others wrote in their original manuscripts were in every case exactly the words God wanted them to use: "We also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit."⁹

What is the result of this four-step process? Sure knowledge. Paul wrote, "We have received ... the Spirit who is from God, *so that we may know* the things freely given to us by God" (2:12, emphasis added). Inspiration leads to a sure knowledge of God's message because His mind is accurately revealed in the Bible right down to the very words used.

4) PROPHECY FULFILLED AS GIVEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Prophecy fulfilled as given in the Old Testament also assures preachers that an objective interpretation of the Bible is possible. For example, Micah 5:2 said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In Matthew 2:4-6, that prophecy was fulfilled *as given*. Micah 5:2 did not mean different things to different people. It didn't mean that the Messiah would be born in Bethshemesh, Bethhoron, Bethel, or Bethany. It meant that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Old Testament prophecy fulfilled as given proves that the Bible has an objective, clear meaning.

5) GOD'S SPIRIT ILLUMINES BELIEVERS' MINDS

A fifth reason it is possible to interpret the Bible with a high level of accuracy and objectivity is *God's Spirit illumines believers' minds to understand the Scripture*. The apostle John

⁹ Wayne Grudem accurately describes the process of inspiration when he writes, "When they actually came to the point of putting pen to paper, the words were fully their own words, but also fully the words that God wanted them to write, words that God would also claim as his own." *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 81.

said that the Holy Spirit teaches believers; He turns on the light so that false teachers will not easily deceive them (1 John 2:26-27). The Spirit's assistance does not make us infallible interpreters, but since Bible interpretation is a divinely assisted task, you can expect that a high level of accuracy and objectivity is possible.¹⁰

6) GOD THINKS AND SPEAKS ANTITHETICALLY

There must be one discoverable meaning for Scripture because *God thinks and speaks antithetically*. The word *antithetical* refers to the fact that something cannot be its opposite. Antithetical thinking is the first rule of logic: *A cannot be non-A*. Is a cow a goat? Is a dog a cat? A jackal a lion? Of course not. Something cannot be its opposite—that's antithetical thinking.

That is important when interpreting the Bible: if something cannot be its opposite, then the Bible cannot mean one thing to a European and something else to an African. The Bible cannot mean two things any more than a cow can be a goat or a dog can be a cat. For example, if a verse teaches that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, it cannot also teach that salvation is by works. Both cannot be right. And that is how God thinks, "I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because *no lie is of the truth*" (1 John 2:21, emphasis added). In God's view of things, error is not truth.

Imagine a circle. Inside the circle is everything God says: it is all true without exception. Outside the circle is everything else, everything that disagrees with what God says. As far as God is concerned there is no traffic between the inside and the outside of that circle: lies are not truth; truths are not lies. The idea that there are many contradictory "truths" is called *pluralism*. God does not think pluralistically. God, for example, does not think that all religions are equally valid. God thinks antithetically: Christ is the one way of salvation; all other ways lead to destruction (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

¹⁰ McCartney, *Let the Reader Understand*, 74.

Jay Adams writes, "People who study the Bible in depth develop antithetical mindsets: They think in terms of contrasts or opposites."¹¹ He is right. Antithetical thinking is found in virtually every paragraph of the Bible. Such opposites include truth and error, the righteous and the wicked, light and darkness, the holy and the unclean, wisdom and folly—the list is endless.

Bible interpretation must reflect God's way of thinking; after all, it's His book. A passage of Scripture cannot have one meaning to Tom, another meaning to Dick, and yet another meaning to Harry. There is not a Western meaning and an African meaning, an urban meaning and a rural meaning. While one passage will often have many applications, every Bible passage has only one meaning, the meaning God intended based on the words, grammar, and syntax He moved the human author to use. Since God thinks antithetically, a passage cannot mean both one thing and another.

7) GOD CAN DO WHAT WE CAN DO

We can be sure that the Bible contains an understandable message from God because *God can do what we can do*. We cannot deny God the ability to speak understandably since we ourselves daily exercise that ability. It is popular today to say that there can be no certainty in Bible interpretation because we can never be sure what anyone (including God) is saying. However, all human relationships are based on the fact that we understand each other amazingly well. In fact, daily human relationships would be impossible if the fog of communication were as impenetrable as some say it is.

Try to tell your bank manager that words have no clear meaning when he informs you that you owe the bank ten thousand US Dollars. He'll tell you to stop talking nonsense and to pay up. Business contracts, homework assignments, and phone calls to your family all assume that objective, accurate communication is normal. Misunderstandings are possible (occasionally even frequent), but if you tell your wife that you will be home next Tuesday, she expects you on

¹¹ Jay Adams, *A Call to Discernment* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1987; reprint, Woodruff, South Carolina: Timeless Texts, 1998), 29.

Tuesday, not Thursday. No matter what people say, daily life works only because understandable communication *is* possible.

Strangely enough, some Christians believe that God is a less capable communicator than they are. They act every day on the assumption that their friends and family understand them; nevertheless, they obstinately refuse to believe that God can speak as clearly as they can.

In Psalm 50:21 God rebuked the wicked because "you thought I was just like you." Sadly, the seminary lecturer I referred to at the beginning of this chapter had not even made that mistake. Like many others today, she had placed God *below* herself. She had imagined that God was weak, fumbling, and incompetent when it came to communicating a clear message. But to say that the omniscient, omnipotent God cannot speak a clear, understandable message is an insult to God.

When you open your Bible for personal study or to prepare your sermons, you can do so convinced that God's message can be discovered. The Bible was written to reveal truth, not hide it. It is an accurate message spoken by a God who knows everything, including how to communicate effectively to His creatures. But while the Bible is a clear, understandable message from God, it still needs to be interpreted. What are the wise, trustworthy guidelines for interpreting God's message?

CHAPTER FOUR

HOW TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE

To preach for God you must first study for God. But through the centuries some preachers have practiced methods of studying and interpreting the Bible that have kept them from preaching for God. Here are two such methods that you want to avoid.

THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD

An allegory is a story whose characters, events, or other features have hidden, symbolic meanings.¹² For example, the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3-9 is a legitimate, Christ-intended allegory. In the parable, Jesus said that the seed represents the gospel, the birds represent Satan, and the soils represent different kinds of hearts. Jesus intended the characters and features of that parable to have symbolic meanings—He told you so in 13:18-23. That is usually the key to biblical allegories: the author explains the symbolic meanings he intends so that you won't have to guess at them.

Some preachers, however, want to interpret the whole Bible allegorically. To do so, they by-pass the clear, historical meaning of the text, and make imaginative associations between something in the text and something from Christian experience or theology. For example, a preacher once interpreted the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 by making the following imaginative connections. The traveler who was attacked represents a pilgrim seeking salvation. The robbers who beat him represent Satan trying to keep him from being saved. Naturally, the good Samaritan is Christ. The oil and wine that the Samaritan administered to the injured man's wounds picture the Holy Spirit and forgiveness. The donkey is the gospel because it was the vehicle that carried the injured man to the inn (the church) where the man recovered.

¹² Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Victor, 1991), 221.

For all its cleverness, that allegorical interpretation completely ignores Jesus' declared purpose for the parable. Jesus was answering the question, Whom must I love as my neighbor? (Luke 10:29). He was not teaching about the process of salvation. Instead of focusing on Jesus' purpose, the preacher imagined his own meaning for the passage. His interpretation was a private or subjective interpretation—one that only he could see. The last time you read Luke 10, did you think that the Samaritan's donkey was the gospel? Ultimately, that preacher preached his own parable, not Jesus'.

As with all attempts at allegorical interpretation, the above attempt fails because no one can be certain whether Jesus intended the details of the parable of the Good Samaritan to have those symbolic meanings. Furthermore, if you accept those meanings, why not others? Why couldn't the beaten man represent Christ on the cross, or the wine picture the blood of Christ, or the inn represent heaven? As long as we are playing the imagination game, why stop? Allegorical interpretation is not studying for God because it has no limits, no restraints: it is human imagination out of control. Ultimately, there is no reason to believe that Jesus intended the parable of the Good Samaritan to have any symbolic meaning. Isn't the plain meaning of the parable—treat even traditional enemies with love—powerful enough?

If you want to preach a sermon about sinners, Christ, forgiveness, the gospel, and the church, there are a multitude of biblical passages that actually address those subjects, but the parable of the Good Samaritan isn't one of them. Preachers who preach for God will preach texts for the reason God and the human author wrote them, not for their own imagined reasons.

THE HOLY SPIRIT METHOD

Some preachers read a passage and make an unstudied guess at what it means, believing that the Holy Spirit will guide them to the right interpretation without study. They ignore the historical context. They ignore the sentences and paragraphs around their passage. They ignore what the passage meant to Moses, Mark, Paul, Peter, and God—the human and divine original

authors. They believe that whatever comes into their minds as they read the text is the right interpretation. Is that studying for God?

Preachers who follow this method believe it is. Usually they defend their practice from Jesus' promise to the disciples in Matthew 10:19-20, "But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say, for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you." Preachers who follow the Holy Spirit method usually frown on diligent study because they believe the Bible says that a truly spiritual preacher won't worry about what to say; he will simply wait for God's Spirit to give him the correct interpretation when he is in the pulpit.

Does Jesus' promise in Matthew 10 mean that God's Spirit will give you the right interpretation of your text as you are walking up to the pulpit on Sunday, even if you did not study? The verses that precede Matthew 10:19-20 will help you decide. Jesus prefaced the promise of 10:19-20 with these words: "Beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues; and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake. But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say..." (Matt 10:17-19a).

There is a time when will you not have to study in order to speak the gospel eloquently, accurately, and powerfully. According to Jesus, when is it? When persecutors have torn your Bible from your hands and have thrown you in prison, when you can hardly think because your lacerated back is screaming from the agony of a brutal whipping, when they drag you into a courtroom to defend your faith in Jesus Christ—under those circumstances—Jesus' promise is, "It will be given you in that hour what you are to say." If you've suffered violent persecution for the cause of Christ and you've had no opportunity to prepare a defense, in that hour the Holy Spirit will make you Luther, Calvin, Whitefield, and Spurgeon all rolled into one. In that hour, the Holy Spirit will give you a message. What does that have to do with how you prepare to preach a sermon in your church on Sunday? Nothing at all.

God's Spirit uses extraordinary means in extraordinary circumstances; in ordinary circumstance He uses ordinary means—diligent study. If you were Shadrach, Meshach, or Abed-

nego, and you had to tell King Nebuchadnezzar that you won't bow to his golden idol, the Spirit will give you just the right words to say before you are thrown into the fiery furnace, even if you haven't had fifteen hours to prepare a flawless sermon manuscript. But the Spirit has said exactly how He will give you a God-honoring message under ordinary circumstances: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). Preachers must depend on God's Spirit, but they must depend on Him *while* studying, not instead of studying.

Neither the allegorical method nor the Holy Spirit method of interpretation will result in preaching for God. With one you preach your imagination, with the other, a guess blamed on the Holy Spirit. For you to preach sermons that God will claim as His own, you'll have to take a different approach altogether to Bible interpretation.

TWELVE PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Studying for God in order to preach for God is a demanding process, but it is not a mysterious one. It starts by praying for divine assistance, a prayer that echoes the psalmist's prayer, "Open my eyes that I might behold wonderful things from Your law" (Ps 119:18). Having sought (and continually seeking) the indispensable help of the Holy Spirit, you then become a carpenter who measures twice and cuts once. You read, striving to cut straight the words, sentences, and paragraphs of Scripture. Cut them skew, and you will never preach for God. Cut them straight, and God will make your voice His voice.

How do you study for God? Surprisingly, the answer is simple: read the Bible as *carefully* and *normally* as possible. While not forgetting its unique characteristics as God-breathed Scripture, you should read the Bible as you might read an important newspaper article, a medical textbook, or a significant legal document. Let the author say what he said based on the words he used. Look for the flow of the author's logic. Do not look for fanciful, allegorical, private meanings. Let the context inform your interpretation.

The following principles are twelve of the most important, long agreed-upon guidelines for careful biblical carpentry. They are the rules that make for wise, thoughtful, cut-it-straight Bible interpretation. The study of these principles is called *hermeneutics* (from the Greek verb *hermeneuo*, to interpret). If you follow these guidelines, you will be well on your way to studying for God.

These hermeneutical principles have two sources: first, the everyday, sensible rules of language that make communication possible, and second, the character of God. In the Bible, God spoke in human languages; therefore, we follow the rules of language to understand Him. But as we do so, we never forget that it is God who spoke. Considering both those facts, you should embrace the following twelve rules of interpretation.

1) THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible can be understood because God meant it to be understood.¹³

I am the Lord, and there is none else. I have not spoken in secret, in some dark land ... I, the Lord, speak righteousness declaring things that are upright (Isa 45:18-19).

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, *but the things revealed belong to us* and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law (Deut 29:29, emphasis added).

Studying for God starts with the assumption that God revealed His words to be understood and lived. As Moses said, the revealed things—the words of God in the Bible—are ours. That means you study God's word *expecting* to discover a coherent, understandable message. Wayne Grudem writes, "The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it."¹⁴

¹³ McCartney, *Let the Reader Understand*, 38-39.

¹⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 108.

The clarity of Scripture does not mean that every passage of Scripture is easy to interpret. Even the apostle Peter acknowledged that not everything in the Bible is equally easy to understand (2 Pet 3:15-16). Therefore, when you come across a theologically obscure passage, give precedence to passages where the Scripture addresses that subject clearly. Nevertheless, the interpreter's assumption is always that God spoke the Scripture to be understood—to reveal truth, not to hide it.

2) THE ACCOMMODATION OF REVELATION

To *accommodate* means to adjust something you normally do in order to fit a specific situation. For example, a preacher who typically preaches in Zulu might accommodate English-speaking guests by translating part of his sermon into English. In this case, to preach only in Zulu would be unkind to his visitors; therefore, he graciously accommodates them by delivering part of his sermon in a language they understand.

God does the same thing. He is an infinite spirit being: He could talk in ways that you and I could never understand. But for our benefit, God chose to reveal Himself in terms that we can comprehend.¹⁵ For example, the Scripture was written in well-known human languages—Hebrew, a little bit of Aramaic, and Greek—not in some heavenly language that we know nothing about.

The accommodation of revelation also means that when God speaks of divine or infinite concepts, He does so in a way that you can relate to. For example, 2 Chronicles 16:9 says that "the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth." Does that mean that God the Father has physical eyes? He doesn't. Other texts tell you that He is an infinite spirit (John 4:24). Then why does God talk about His *eyes*? God knows that eyesight is the most perceptive of human senses; therefore, He describes His infinite perceiving abilities in a way that you can understand. The lesser thing (human eyesight) helps you understand the infinitely greater thing (God's all-powerful ability to perceive).

¹⁵ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1970), 99-100.

God makes a similar accommodation when He speaks of "the hand of the Lord." Does God the Father have hands? No. But He knows that for us hands represent power—the ability to grasp something and control it. Knowing that, God graciously describes His infinite power as His hand. That's accommodation. Like an adult speaking to a child, God stoops to our level and describes Himself in ways that we can understand.

3) THE HARMONY OF SCRIPTURE

Although written by more than thirty human authors over a period of 1,500 years, the Bible agrees with itself. Can you imagine thirty people writing on any subject and agreeing perfectly with one another? And what if the subject were religion? And what if some of them lived a thousand years apart? The theological agreement of the Bible is amazing. Actually, it is not so amazing when you recall that behind the Bible's array of human authors is one divine Author. Because the Scripture was spoken by the God who knows everything and never lies, the Bible harmonizes with itself; it does not contradict itself.

The harmony of Scripture is a foundational doctrine, but it can be abused. Sometimes preachers determine what they believe based on *one* text and then use a hammer and pry bar to force every other text to "harmonize" with that view. Don't ever do that. Let every passage say what God said, and in the end they will harmonize. Sometimes two texts will teach two distinct but equally true truths (such as the deity and humanity of Christ). Let both texts speak. But since the Bible has one divine Author, we come to it expecting to find theological agreement, and indeed, we do.

4) NORMAL INTERPRETATION

Usually people's biggest problem in Bible interpretation is that they read the Bible abnormally. When they open their Bibles, it's as if they forget everything they ever learned about reading. They ignore the context; they look for secret, personal meanings. Normal interpretation,

on the other hand, means that you read the Bible following the reading practices you would consider sensible for reading any other important document, human or divine.¹⁶

When the headmaster writes a note to the school's maintenance man instructing him to replace a faulty florescent light in classroom eleven, that's an important document to the maintenance man. It's his job to fix such problems. What does the maintenance man do? He doesn't read a mystical, secret meaning about spiritual light into the headmaster's note. He reads it normally and carefully in order to determine which light is burnt out, and then fetches a fresh globe and a stepladder. That's normal interpretation; we need to read our Bibles the same way.

Sometimes this approach to interpreting the Bible is called *literal* interpretation—you take the words literally, taking them to mean what they say, rather than giving them some fantastic, imaginary interpretation.¹⁷ But is everything in the Bible literal? Doesn't the Bible use figures of speech? The Bible often uses figurative language: the Lamb of God, wolves in sheep's clothing, God our rock, and so on. Not everything in the Bible is to be taken literally—God is not literally a *rock*. That's why this principle is called *normal interpretation*. The question then, is how do you normally decide whether a statement is literal or figurative?

If your mother says, "You're a hard-headed mule," does she mean you have long ears, gray fur, and thick yellow teeth? Of course not. She is using a word picture to rebuke your stubbornness. It is *normal* to communicate using word pictures and comparisons. But not everything is a figure of speech. If your mother says, "I would like a cup of tea," she means just that. She doesn't intend a figurative meaning in which tea is salvation, the gospel, or forgiveness. How can you distinguish between your mother's figurative statements (hard-headed mule) and her literal statements (a cup of tea)? It's not as hard as you might think.

You distinguish between literal and figurative communication every day. How? You start with the literal meaning, and if it doesn't make sense, you switch to consider possible figurative meanings.¹⁸ In other words, in normal listening or reading you assume something is literal until it is

¹⁶ Ibid., 123.

¹⁷ Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 147.

¹⁸ Ibid., 145-6.

obvious that it must be figurative—you don't actually have long ears, gray fur, and thick yellow teeth; therefore, when addressed to you, the words *hard-headed mule* must be figurative.

When you read the Bible, do the same thing. Assume that God's words are to be taken literally unless it is obvious that He is using a figure of speech. For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door" (John 10:9), you do not conclude that Jesus is made of wood and has hinges. Your mind examines the literal meaning of Jesus' statement, finds it unlikely, and accepts it as a figure of speech. That's normal reading.

With normal reading, you always begin by assuming that a text should be interpreted literally until it is clear that it must be understood otherwise. But even when interpreting figurative language you start with the literal: What is a door? What purpose does a door serve? Why would Jesus compare Himself to a door or a gate? The literal function of a door suggests the meaning of the figure: Jesus is the gateway to eternal life.

5) ONE MEANING OF A TEXT

The grass is green. Does that sentence mean that the grass is purple, red, blue, or yellow? Does it mean that the trees are brown? If *The grass is green* can mean all those things, then it would mean nothing. Language is helpful only when it means one thing and not another. For example, the word *green* is helpful precisely because it doesn't mean purple, red, blue, yellow, or brown. The word *grass* is useful precisely because it distinguishes that plant from those somewhat taller plants we call trees. In the same way, the words and sentences of the Bible are helpful because they mean one thing and not another. The principle of one meaning is basic to all communication, but who determines the one intended meaning of a word or sentence?

For communication to be effective, *the person speaking or writing* must be allowed to dictate the meaning of his or her words.¹⁹ For example, when I was growing up, my mother often told me to clean my room. She, the one who gave the command, was the one who decided what that command meant. If I decided that *Clean your room* meant to push all my dirty clothes under

¹⁹ McCartney, *Let the Reader Understand*, 35.

the bed, I soon discovered that my mother's interpretation of that command was different from mine—and somehow her interpretation always won! That's the way it should be. She spoke the command; she had the right to define its meaning.

In the same way, when God speaks, He gets to define what He means. "Aha," you say, "but God is not here to explain His meaning." True. Therefore, we must interpret His written words as normally and carefully as possible. The words themselves, the flow of thought, and the historical context of the human author through whom God spoke will reveal what God meant.

I knew that when my mother told me to clean my room, she didn't mean I should thrust all my dirty clothes under the bed. *Why?* The word *clean* didn't mean that to her. And if in doubt, I was responsible to discover what the word *clean* did mean to her, and to act accordingly. In the same way, it is your job as a Bible interpreter to discover what the words and sentences of the Bible meant to the original human authors as God stooped to speak through them. We are not free to give the words of Moses, Isaiah, or Paul *our* meaning. We must give them the one meaning they intended.

Every Bible passage has one true meaning, the meaning God intended through the human author. What it meant to *them* is what it means. If *The grass is green* can also mean that the grass is brown, that communication is nonsense. God's word becomes just as meaningless if it has more than one meaning.

6) INTERPRETATION, *THEN* APPLICATION

If the principle of one meaning is confusing to you, it could be that you are thinking about application, not meaning. In fact, when Christians say, "What this verse means to me...", what they are often saying is, "How this verse *applies* to me is..." They want to personalize the verse before they find out what it meant to Moses, Matthew, or Paul. In other words, they want to decide how to act before they actually find out what God wants them to do. That's dangerous for Christians,

and it's doubly dangerous for preachers. Therefore, you must faithfully maintain a distinction between interpretation and application.²⁰

Interpretation strives to discover the meaning the original author intended in his historical situation, for example, what Paul meant when he wrote to the church of Rome two thousand years ago. Interpretation is not worried about how Paul's words affect our lives today. That's vitally important, but that application is a separate, second step. Interpretation discovers the passage's significance to everyone, everywhere, all the time, because it discovers the original author's meaning.

Application, on the other hand, refers to the various ways the original author's one meaning affects life today. Application refers to the different ways different people at different times in different places can live out the one meaning of that text. Interpretation is like a man with a shovel digging for buried treasure. He digs and digs until he finds the chest of gold coins. Application refers to all the different ways he can spend those coins once he has found them.

THREE EXAMPLES

Consider the command, *You shall not steal*. That command has one meaning: *don't take something that is not yours or not yours to use in that way*. That meaning holds true no matter who you are, where you live, or when you read Exodus 20:15.

However, rain from one cloud might fall on many fields. In other words, the one meaning of *You shall not steal* can be lived out in different ways by different people at different times in different places. For a ten-year-old boy, that command restrains his temptation to stuff a chocolate bar in his pocket when the shop attendant isn't looking. For an adult, it rebukes his temptation to take a nap in the sun during work hours (as an employee, his time is not his to use in *that way*). Those are two different applications based on the one, author-intended meaning of Exodus 20:15. That one meaning can be applied to literally thousands of situations, to adults and

²⁰ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 113.

children, to men and women, to Africans and Asians, but the interpretation of Exodus 20:15 never changes: *don't take something that is not yours or not yours to use in that way.*

As a second example, consider Proverbs 15:1, *A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.* That proverb can be applied in a host of different situations. A father can apply it during a tense elders' meeting by restraining his tongue and speaking quietly when another elder disagrees with him. A mother might apply it when her teenage daughter grumbles about having to help prepare supper when she would rather be listening to music with her friends. Mom's gentle firmness avoids a heated debate. The daughter can apply the self-restraint of Proverbs 15:1 when her younger brother tries to start an argument by calling her an insulting name—will she respond with gentle words or with a little name-calling of her own? Her brother can apply it on the soccer field when an argument is brewing about whether a penalty kick should be awarded for a tripping incident. Those are all different applications of the text, but Proverbs 15:1 has only one interpretation: *kind words and a gentle tone of voice will help you avoid sinful conflict.*

Is it critical to distinguish between interpretation and application? Yes. Rushing to application before discovering God's meaning is a sign that *you* want to control the text. You want to privatize or personalize the text, but the text is God's. The Bible should be applied by every person, but it is God's meaning that must be applied, not one's own. Furthermore, what will happen if the ten-year-old boy grows up thinking that *You shall not steal* means only that he should not shoplift chocolate bars? He will spend his adult days stealing from his employer by sleeping in the sun when he should be working. Why? He confused an application of *You shall not steal* with its meaning, and therefore, never saw all the other possible applications.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3 Paul said, *This is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.* If the preacher thunders, "This verse means that you should not look at pornography," he has given an *application*, but not the *interpretation* of the text.²¹ If not looking at pornography is the interpretation, then 1 Thessalonians 4:3 says nothing to the young

²¹ Some of the confusion on this issue is due to the fact that the English word *mean* can be used both of the author's intended *meaning* of a text and of the *implications* of that text for the lives of believers. This is a regrettable weakness of English. Meaning and implications are, in fact, two different things.

adult who is sleeping with his girlfriend or the man who is cheating on his wife. And you know that can't be right.

By confusing interpretation and application, you might unintentionally exclude many important applications. You'll say what you want to say, but not all that God said. The interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:3 is much broader than just pornography: *completely avoid seeking sexual fulfillment outside of a one-man, one-woman marriage relationship*. From that one, authorially intended meaning—a meaning that is the same for everyone, everywhere, all the time—you and your congregation can create a host of legitimate and useful applications.

Interpreting the text and applying the text are distinct steps in sermon preparation. Discovering what the text would have meant to the original author comes first. Once that is established, you can reflect on the multitude of ways that text affects life today.

A PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Let's take a moment to practice distinguishing interpretation from application. Let's assume you are studying Romans 12:1-2. Here's your assignment: rewrite Romans 12:1-2 in your own words. As you rewrite it, start every sentence with the words *Paul said*. Make sure you actually write only what Paul said *to the Romans* in that verse. That is the interpretation. Once you've done that, write down three ways *you* can apply what Paul said to the Romans. You don't live in first century Rome, but God does intend His word to apply to you. Start with interpretation, then move to application. Don't move on to the discussion below until you've done this assignment.

How did it go? Let me give you an example of both a wrong and a right effort, focusing on the first part of Romans 12:2, which says, *Do not be conformed to this world*. The first attempt hurdles interpretation and goes straight to application. It gets too specific too soon.

Wrong approach: "To me not being conformed to the world means that we shouldn't watch television. In fact, this verse means all television is evil. If you own a television you're not a Christian. That's what Paul said to the Romans, you know."

While I share that preacher's aversion to the unbiblical content of most television shows, I think he might have put the applicational cart before the horse of interpretation. Paul did not tell the Romans not to watch television; they didn't even have televisions. While the preacher's application might be valid, we can't be sure, because the interpretation was assumed. And the interpretation of a Bible passage is too important to assume it.

Right approach: Interpretation. "Paul said that the Roman believers should not embrace the patterns of thinking and living evidenced by the unbelievers around them." That rewords what Paul said to the Romans. (A slavish repetition of *Paul said* really forces you to stick to interpretation, doesn't it.) This interpretation explains key words such as *conformed* and *world*. If Paul came back from heaven, he would say, "Yes, that's what I meant. Believers are not to think and live like unbelievers." Having established the interpretation, now we can think about an *application*. "Something that influences me to think like an unbeliever is watching television. To avoid being pressed into the mold of worldly thinking, I should be more discerning about what I watch on television. Perhaps I should even consider not watching television at all."

Interpretation—what Paul and God said—is distinct from how you and I are to act based on what they said. Dig for the treasure of the interpretation; once you've found it, then think about all the ways that you can spend that treasure. A good Bible interpreter understands those two steps and keeps them separate: first interpretation, *then* application.

7) CONTEXT

Context refers to the words, sentences, and paragraphs that come before and after the text you are studying. This principle emphasizes the fact that you discover the true meaning of a passage only when you consider the words around it.²² As with all words, the words of the Bible mean something based on the words around them. The word *god*, when placed next to the name *Baal*, does not mean the same thing as it does when it is placed next to the name *Yahweh*. The

²² Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 106.

Tswana people of southern Africa have a saying, "Man is a man through other people."²³ In other words, a man has no distinct identity apart from his family and his tribe. In the same way, words in the Bible have no identity apart from their family and tribe—the words, sentences, and paragraphs around them.

For example, Philippians 2:3 says *Do nothing*. Do nothing?!! Does the Bible actually say that? The sluggard leaps from his bed to celebrate; the teenager shouts for joy and dances a victory dance. This is the biblical command that they have been looking for: *Do nothing!* Is Philippians 2:3 justification for laziness? No. The rest of the verse says, "Do nothing *from selfishness or empty conceit*." The words *Do nothing* have a family. And when you meet that family, you discover the command's true identity.

Philippians 4:6 says *Be anxious*. The perpetual worrier exclaims, "Aha! God not only tolerates my anxiety, He commands it." Does Philippians 4:6 remove worry from the list of God-condemned sins? No. The rest of the verse reads, "Be anxious *for nothing*." By ignoring the words around a command, you can stand God's word on its head. In fact, ignoring the context of those two commands would have led you to disobey God, not to obey him. To adapt our Tswana saying, "A word is a word through the words around it."

AN EXAMPLE FROM ISAIAH

Isaiah 1:10 says, *Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah*. To whom is God speaking? Based on reading only Isaiah 1:10, you would conclude that Isaiah is addressing the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But verse 10 belongs to a tribe—the verses around it. And when you meet the relatives of Isaiah 1:10, the picture changes dramatically. For example, you find that verse 1 says Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. A quick glance at your Bible dictionary will tell you that those kings reigned 1400 years *after* God scorched Sodom and Gomorrah from the face of the earth. Verse 3 says that Isaiah proclaimed God's word to *Israel*.

²³ Van der Walt, *Understanding and Rebuilding Africa: From Desperation Today to Expectation for Tomorrow* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: The Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa, 2003), 143, 139.

Furthermore, verse 8 addresses the listeners as the *daughter of Zion*, a poetic Old Testament name for Jerusalem. And finally, verse 9 uses the words "like Sodom" and "like Gomorrah."

Context is important. If you read only Isaiah 1:10, you would conclude that Isaiah 1 is addressed to Sodom and Gomorrah. Your interpretation would be embarrassingly wrong. Isaiah was preaching to Jerusalem, Judah, and Israel, but he was doing so by means of a powerful comparison between Jerusalem and those two evil cities of antiquity. The true interpretation of Isaiah 1:10 is found only by considering its family and tribe, the sentences and paragraphs around it. That's true of the whole Bible: context determines meaning.

In fact, we saw the principle of context in action earlier in this chapter when we considered Matthew 10:19-20 and the Holy Spirit method of interpretation. The context (vv. 17-18) made it clear that God's Spirit will give you a sermon by extraordinary means only under the extraordinary circumstances of violent persecution.

AN EXAMPLE FROM JEREMIAH

Jeremiah 29:11 is a favorite sound-bite verse for Christian greeting cards and calendars: *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for calamity."* Some Christians cling to this verse, believing that it is a promise that nothing will go wrong in their lives. However, if you read Jeremiah 29, you find that this promise is not a general promise to all believers. It is not like the promises one often finds in the Psalms, such as in Psalm 145:18, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him." When you meet the family and tribe of Jeremiah 29:11, you find that, far from being a general promise to all believers, this promise is part of a letter sent by Jeremiah to the Jews exiled in Babylon over five hundred years before the time of Christ. In that letter, God promised that those Jewish exiles would not stay in captivity; after seventy years God would bring them home to Jerusalem.

The context—a promise to a specific group of people about a specific plan of rescue—limits the application of Jeremiah 29:11. It isn't a sweeping promise that all believers will have an easy and calamity-free passage through life. Jeremiah himself was hated, harried, kidnapped, and

thrown into prison for his faithful preaching—it certainly didn't apply to him! A promise God gave to Jews in the sixth century BC to rescue them from exile should not be interpreted as a guarantee that God has only easy and comfortable things planned for believers today. Context determines meaning; a word is a word through the words around it.

8) PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

God revealed His truth over an extended period of time—about fifteen hundred years. Naturally, His revelation became more detailed as time went along. In a word, it *progressed*.²⁴ It did not progress from false to true (it was always true), but it did progress from partial to complete. The letter to the Hebrews says that completion focuses on our Savior, Jesus Christ: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb 1:1-2). We know more today than Moses, Solomon, or David knew in the Old Testament era: they anticipated God's greatest sermon; we've heard it.

As rewarding as a more complete knowledge is, it holds a danger for today's Bible interpreters. The fact that God's revelation has grown more detailed over time means you must avoid the trap of reading *later* revelation back into *earlier* revelation (usually the New Testament back into the Old Testament).²⁵ In Genesis 12:3, God said that through Abraham He would bless all the families of the earth. At that time, God didn't give a detailed explanation of what that blessing would be. However, in later revelation such as Galatians 3, God said that blessing ultimately includes salvation through Jesus Christ, Abraham's ultimate seed. It would be a mistake to assume that Abraham understood all of that when God gave him that promise in Genesis 12. Only as revelation progressed did God fully unveil the specifics of His plan.

When studying Old Testament passages, you must take care not to read into them more than the author could have known at his time in history. Once you have established the author's

²⁴ James E. Rosscup, "Hermeneutics and Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, John MacArthur, Jr. and The Master's Seminary faculty, (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1992), 131.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

meaning in his historical context, you can and should fill out that meaning with later revelation. There is no reason to act as if you don't have the rest of the Bible. However, interpreting a passage in its historical setting on one hand, and filling out that passage with information from later revelation on the other, are two different steps of sermon preparation.

9) GRAMMAR AND SYNTAX

Paul went to Corinth does not mean the same thing as *Corinth went to Paul*. Why not? People who speak English follow certain rules (word order, and so on), and based on those rules, *Paul went to Corinth* and *Corinth went to Paul* can't mean the same thing. In fact, if you don't follow the rules, your words become nonsense. If I wrote *Bible your read*, you would wonder what I meant. But if I write *Read your Bible*, you know exactly what I mean. Why the difference? In the first sentence I did not follow the rules of English; in the second I did.

Rules are important. How can there be a soccer world cup every four years? Simply because soccer is soccer everywhere. The world cup is possible because the rules of soccer do not change from person to person or country to country. Teams from all over the world can come together and have a meaningful competition because soccer is played the same way everywhere on the planet. In the same way, we can all "play" English because there is a basic set of rules that all effective English speakers follow. Those rules make a language useful; they make it understandable.

Grammar and *syntax* refer to the rules that make your sentences mean one thing and not another. Without those rules, there would be no communication. Specifically, *grammar* refers to the rules governing how individual words relate to each other. *Syntax* refers to how groups of words relate to each other.²⁶ Most people are not specialists in these rules; they know just enough to get by. Preachers are not most people. Preachers must be specialists because they want to

²⁶ J. William Johnston, "Grammatical Analysis: Making Connections" in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: An Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 57.

preach God's mind, and God revealed His mind using words and sentences whose meanings are determined by grammar and syntax.

Rules simplify Bible interpretation: a verse cannot mean more or less than the rules of language make it mean. To be sure, the context will shape that meaning. God often uses figures of speech. At times the inherent flexibility of words and their relationships gives the interpreter several options. Grammar and syntax simplify Bible interpretation; they don't make it easy. Nonetheless, since God followed the rules of language when He spoke, following those rules will lead you to His thoughts.²⁷

Many preachers view grammar and syntax like broccoli—they know it's good for them, but they would rather not eat it if possible. Never think like that. In fact, let me illustrate the importance of grammar and syntax to theology. In 1553, the city of Geneva burned a man named Servetus at the stake because he denied the full deity of Jesus Christ. Although burning is not the correct New Testament means for dealing with heresy (Titus 3:9-11), notice how the following summary of Servetus' death illustrates the importance of grammar and syntax to theology.

[Servetus] passed away after committing a terrible error in syntax; he cried out, "Oh Jesus, son of eternal God, have pity on me!" in place of saying, as was proper, "Oh Jesus, eternal son of God." His punishment was due to the misplacing of a single adjective. Heresy is never anything but a question of grammar.²⁸

10) HISTORICAL APPROPRIATENESS

As a student of the Bible, you are interpreting a book written between two thousand and three thousand five hundred years ago: history is important to your work.²⁹ As you interpret, the principle of historical appropriateness will guard you from two errors. The first error is reading the Bible as if its events happened yesterday. For example, when Jesus traveled from town to

²⁷ The scholars who have translated the Bible into English (or other languages) know the rules of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek grammar—the original languages of Scripture. The English translations that work the hardest to reflect the grammar and syntax of the original languages are *The New American Standard* (NAS) and its *1995 Update*, the *English Standard Version* (ESV), the *New King James Version* (NKJV), and the *King James Version* (KJV). See Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002), 50-55.

²⁸ Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 225.

²⁹ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 6.

town, He didn't go by taxi. He didn't preach using a microphone and a sound system. He didn't cross the Sea of Galilee in a motorboat. To describe Jesus' ministry in those ways would be ridiculous; they are not historically appropriate.

In the same way, you might read about the shield of faith in Ephesians 6:16, and immediately think of the shield traditionally carried into battle by Zulu warriors. But the warriors of Paul's day (Roman soldiers) did not carry that kind of shield. If you described the shield of Ephesians 6 as a Zulu shield, your interpretation would be historically inappropriate.

Besides reading modern ideas into the events or instruments of the ancient world, a second historical trap is the danger of forgetting biblical history itself. For example, in an earlier section we decided that Isaiah 1 could not be addressed to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah although it initially appeared to be so. Those two cities had been destroyed by God more than a thousand years before Isaiah lived; therefore, it is historically inappropriate to conclude that his sermon was addressed to them.

I once listened to a sermon from Philippians in which the preacher rightly emphasized the important place of the word *rejoice* in that epistle. To highlight the fact that Paul's joy was not dependent on his circumstances, the preacher also noted that Paul was in prison when he wrote. The preacher then went on to describe the Mamertine Prison of ancient Rome. That prison was built along the lines of a giant septic tank, and is not a place easily associated with a repeated use of the word *rejoice*. According to the preacher, the fact that Paul wrote Philippians from the Mamertine Prison proved that Paul's joy was not dependent on his circumstances.

Unfortunately, that man forgot his biblical history. Philippians was almost certainly written during Paul's *first* imprisonment when he was under house arrest in Rome.³⁰ In that imprisonment, Paul was not held in the Mamertine Prison. According to Acts 28, he lived under house arrest in his own rented flat for two years (28:30). While it is true that Paul's joy was not dependent on his circumstances, it is not historically accurate to say that Paul was rejoicing while writing Philippians in spite of the fact that he was being held in a dark, filthy dungeon below the streets of Rome. A

³⁰ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 26.

good Bible interpreter always makes sure that his interpretations are appropriate to the history of the biblical era.

11) WORD STUDY

To understand a passage of Scripture, its key words must be defined accurately. When the Bible says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph 2:8), neither you nor I are free to give the words *grace*, *saved*, and *faith* our own definitions. Instead, we must discover what those words meant to Paul when he used them. You can do a lot of word study with just an exhaustive English concordance and some persistence. As you look at every use of a key biblical word, you'll see its range of meanings and how it is used in different contexts.³¹

Word studies are an important part of sermon preparation because words can be used in different ways.³² Consider the English word *spring* as used in the following sentence: *In spring, I will spring over the spring on my way to the spring.* (I admit that I had fun coming up with that one!) After consulting a dictionary for a list of possible meanings of the word *spring*, you can easily make sense of it: *In the season that follows winter, I will leap over a curly piece of metal on my way to the place where water comes up out of the ground.*

All languages conserve effort by occasionally giving one word a variety of meanings. How can you tell which meaning is intended when a word has more than one meaning or a range of similar meanings? Context. The word's family and tribe point you to its identity. If I said, *The pipe is blocked*, you might not be sure if I meant a sewer pipe or an old man's tobacco pipe. But if I said, *The pipe is blocked, and the plumber is on his way to clear it*, the context (the reference to a plumber) clears up the mystery. In relationship to the word *plumber*, the word *pipe* almost certainly refers to a sewer pipe, not an instrument for poisoning yourself with tobacco.

Let's consider a biblical example. The biblical authors use the word *flesh* in a variety of ways—of meat, the human body, the human race, man's sinful weakness, and so on. What do you

³¹ Rosscup, "Hermeneutics and Expository Preaching," 127.

³² Darrell L. Bock, "Lexical Analysis," in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: An Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 138.

do in a case like that? The context will coach you. If the passage talks about eating flesh, you can be sure that meat is intended. If it says, "All flesh has gone astray," you would suspect it is referring to the human race. If it says, "Do not walk according to the flesh," you can be sure that sinful human weakness is meant.

One of the great dangers a Bible student faces is reading his definition of a word into a biblical one. For example, it is common in Africa to associate the word *salvation* primarily with rescue from sickness and poverty. It is much less common to define *salvation* as rescue from God's wrath at sinners due to their disobedience of His holy law. However, the question is not how we use the word *salvation*, but how a biblical author uses it.

To discover a biblical author's meaning, first evaluate all the uses of that word by that author.³³ Then explore its uses by other biblical authors (for example, Paul might use a word differently than John or Peter does). If you are working in the New Testament, you should always note the Old Testament background of a word. Most of the New Testament authors were Jewish men, and as such, their education came almost exclusively from Genesis through Malachi. From where, then, do you think they obtained their theological language?³⁴

Today there are many excellent lexicons (Greek or Hebrew dictionaries) and theological word books that provide invaluable help when you are wrestling with the meaning of a biblical word. If you want to preach for God, it's worth saving your money to buy one or two. They will help you give God's words God's meanings.

12) THE CHECKING PRINCIPLE

Bible interpretation didn't start yesterday, and you are not the only one whom the Spirit illumines. Therefore, it is a good practice to check your understanding of a passage against the interpretation of Bible scholars both past and present.³⁵ For example, you might want to think

³³ Zuck, *Basic Biblical Interpretation*, 104-5.

³⁴ David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 18.

³⁵ Rosscup, "Hermeneutics and Expository Preaching," 135.

twice about preaching an interpretation that all Christians in the last five hundred years have rejected. Furthermore, it is impossible for preachers like you and me to know all of the historical, grammatical, and geographic details that affect the interpretation of a passage of Scripture. Just who are the *sons of Javan* in Genesis 10:4? What kind of shield would Paul have pictured in his mind when he spoke of the shield of faith? It takes Bible scholars a lifetime of study to provide accurate answers to such questions. You can shorten a lifetime to two minutes when you use a Bible dictionary to find out that Javan was the Hebrew name for Greece or to discover what a Roman soldier's shield looked like.

Notice, however, that the checking principle is the last principle in this section. As a rule it's best to do your own study of a passage, and then compare it with someone else's. Sometimes you'll need to use a Bible dictionary or commentaries early in the study process to get a handle on a slippery word or a difficult theological concept. That's advisable. However, avoid the trap of opening a commentary and reading it as if it were the Bible. Rather than read the results of someone else's analysis, first analyze the passage yourself. By all means, use the checking principle; it will save your interpretational life. But don't become so commentary-dependent that you never develop your own ability to interpret the Scripture.

CONCLUSION

Soccer has rules, as every game must: only the goalie can use his hands; going in cleats-first earns a red card; defenders are not supposed to grab, trip, or bite an opponent who is trying to score a goal. If a soccer player ignores the rules, the referee sends him off. God is equally severe with preachers who misrepresent His words because they have failed to follow the rules of interpretation: "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (Jas 3:1). If you don't apply these twelve principles of interpretation, God might give you a red card for your next sermon!

CHAPTER FIVE

GRAMMAR AND SYNTAX: THE PREACHER'S FRIENDS

In Psalm 19, David wrote about two things that declare God's glory: the heavens and God's written word (vv. 1-6, 7-14). Of the two, which more effectively communicates detailed truth about God? Certainly, the beauty of a sunset reveals God's power, grandeur, majesty, and His love of color, but can it reveal detailed doctrine? Can a sunset reveal how to please God? No. In fact, a sunset can't even tell you which God made it. The heavens might make you think great thoughts about God, but what if the god you're thinking about is Baal?

God's primary revelation of Himself is in words, not pictures—and for good reason. Words are more precise; they explain details far better. A familiar saying claims that a picture is worth a thousand words. That's true in the sense that a picture sparks emotion more easily than words can: one picture of desperate, dirty, starving street orphans will stir your compassion more quickly than a thousand-word newspaper article describing the same scene.

Nonetheless, pictures have a crippling weakness: they can be interpreted however you please. That's why pictures require captions—you need words to interpret them correctly. For example, when it comes to telling you which God made the world, a sunset would benefit greatly from this caption: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Those ten words are worth a million sunsets, because they tell you that the universe was not made by Baal, Allah, or anyone else except Yahweh, the God of the Bible.

When it comes to divine revelation, words *are* better than pictures. Paul said to the Corinthians, "God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message *preached* to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21, emphasis added). Sinners are not saved through the foolishness of the message drawn or danced. Salvation requires words—the words of Scripture read or the words of Scripture preached. In short, as a preacher of the gospel, you must deal with words. Since God revealed Himself in words, not pictures, you must have a basic knowledge of how words and language work.

RIFLES AND SWORDS

Even the rawest recruit in the army can fire his rifle if his sergeant shows him where the safety catch and the trigger are. However, only a highly trained marksman can hit a target four hundred meters away. Why? The marksman knows that a bullet fired from that kind of rifle drops a certain number of centimeters while traveling that distance. Because of his expertise, when the marksman shoots, he hits the bull's-eye ten times out of ten. Because of his lack of knowledge, ten times out of ten the recruit kills dirt in front of the target.

You don't want to kill dirt when it comes to interpreting God's word. You want to hit the center of the target every time. How? By knowing your weapon—in this case, not a rifle but a sword, the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17). Whether you are studying from Hebrew and Greek or an English translation, you must know enough about language to handle the sword of the Spirit deftly, with the skill and precision of a master (2 Tim 2:15).

As I said in an earlier chapter, most people aren't masters when it comes to grammar and syntax. They know just enough of the rules of language to get by. Preachers are not most people. As a preacher, you handle the words of God Himself. When it comes to language, you need a marksman's knowledge of his rifle, a swordsman's knowledge of his blade. Therefore, this chapter provides a review of basic English grammar to help you study for God so you can preach for God.

It is not my aim to turn you into a professional grammarian (I'm not one myself); however, to be a good preacher you need to be familiar with these terms and concepts for two reasons. First, the best Bible commentaries use grammatical and syntactical terms all the time, assuming that you know what they mean. To use technical commentaries to their full value, you need to have a basic grasp of grammar. Second, knowing grammatical and syntactical terms will make your exegetical work easier. How so? Study goes faster when you know the name of what you are looking at. For example, if I told you that while walking by the lake I saw a large, powerful, dark brown bird with a white head, neck, and shoulders, you might be able to figure out that I saw an African fish eagle. However, if I had known the name of that majestic bird, no guessing would have been necessary.

In the same way, when interpreting Scripture, you can call a group of words that starts with *in order that* "a group of words that starts with *in order that*." Or you can call it a *purpose clause*. Knowing the name of what you're looking at makes interpreting the Bible faster, more precise. Imagine if a mechanic had no specialized names for his different spanners. It's a lot easier to ask for a socket set than to ask for "the spanner that when you move it in one direction it exerts power, but when you move it the other direction, it goes clickety, clickety, clickety." In the same way, your sermon preparation will go more smoothly if you know the names of the common birds and spanners of language.

Still not convinced? Does a bricklayer need to know the difference between a brick and mortar? Of course he does—they are the basic materials of his job. In fact, you would fire him by lunchtime the first day if he didn't know the difference. As a Bible interpreter, words and language are your basic materials, and you should be fired if you aren't developing a craftsman's knowledge of them. You don't need to be a professional grammarian; however, you do need enough expertise to be able to handle God's words with precision—if *you* can't, who in your congregation will? This chapter is important: it lays the critical groundwork for block diagramming, the study method we'll learn shortly.*

WORDS

Words are the bricks and mortar that God employed to construct the Bible. To understand what God said well enough to preach for Him, you must know what kinds of bricks and mortar He used.

Noun: A noun represents a person, place, thing, or abstract idea.

Examples: John, Africa, ball, justice

*This chapter is intended to be a *review* of English grammar. If these things are completely new to you, you might want to borrow a grade five or six textbook on English grammar from one of the students in your church and study it in detail. "A child's grammar?" you howl. Sure. God's men must be humble. Be encouraged as you do so: if a child can learn this stuff, you can too.

Pronoun: A pronoun is used in the place of a noun.

Examples: he, she, they, it, you, them

Verb: A verb represents an *action* or a *state of being*.

Action verbs: run, jump, write, preach

State of being verbs: is, are, was, were, am

State of being verbs do not refer to something you *do*, but to something you *are*. *Paul is an apostle. Paul is tall.* Paul doesn't do those things; he *is* those things; he exists in that state. State of being verbs act like an equal sign: *Paul=apostle. Paul=tall.*

Adjective: An adjective describes a noun or pronoun.

Examples: the *red* ball, a *dull* lecture; a *great* preacher

Adverb: An adverb describes a verb, an adjective, or another adverb. It tells how, when, why, where, or to what extent, and usually ends in *ly*.

Examples: He ran *quickly*. (how he ran)
Initially he was afraid. (when he was afraid)
a *terribly* dull lecture (to what extent it was dull)

Preposition: A preposition shows a relationship between the words before and after it.

Examples: the king *of* France
(*Of* points out a relationship between *king* and *France*.)

Billy collapsed *into* the chair.
(*Into* describes the relationship between Billy's collapse and the chair.)

Participle: Participles are verb-like words that end in *ing*, *ed*, or *en*. They act either as adjectives (describing a noun) or adverbs (describing a verb).

Examples: He sat down by the *running* stream.
(*Running* describes the noun *stream*.)

John slipped, *dropping* his books on the pavement.
(*Dropping...* describes what happened when John slipped.)

Important note: when joined with a state of being verb, participles become part of the verb:

Examples: I *am asking* you to sit down.
(When joined with *am*, the participle *asking* becomes part of the verb.)

Billy *was going* to school.

Gerund: Participles that act like nouns are called gerunds. They make actions into nouns.

Examples: I love *singing*.
Running is my favorite exercise.

Infinitive: An infinitive is a verb with *to* in front of it: *to sing*, *to run*, *to believe*. Infinitives are very flexible. They can function as a noun, an adjective, an adverb, or a verb in purpose clauses.

Examples: *To live* is Christ, *to die* is gain.
(The infinitives make the actions of living and dying into nouns.)

Jesus came into the world *to save* sinners.
(Expresses purpose.)

SENTENCES

Bricks and mortar provide the basic materials for building a house. However, depending on how you combine them, you can make a wall, a floor, or a doorway. Words can also be combined in different ways, resulting in totally different meanings. *Billy hit the ball* doesn't mean the same thing as *The ball hit Billy*. The following are the most common ways that words are used to build a sentence.

Verbs:

Meaning is in the verbs. If you want to know what a Bible passage is about, look at the verbs. They are the road signs that point you to the author's message. Verbs can be active, passive, or refer to a state of being.

Billy <i>hit</i> the ball.	(active)
Billy <i>was hit</i> by the ball.	(passive—the action is done <i>to</i> the subject)
Billy <i>is</i> tall.	(state of being)

Subject:

The subject is the part of the sentence about which something is said.

Billy ran home.
John is my brother.
Paul was imprisoned in Philippi.
[*You*] Stand by the door.

Direct object:

The direct object is the part of the sentence that receives the action of an active verb.

Billy hit <i>the ball</i> .	<i>The ball</i> receives the action of the active verb <i>hit</i> .
I believe <i>that Jesus is God</i> .	What is receiving the action of <i>I believe</i> ?

In this case, a group of words, *that Jesus is God*, receives the action of believing. That group of words acts just like one noun, and is the direct object of *I believe*. Although it seems more complex, *I believe that Jesus is God* is no different than saying *I believe the truth*.

Predicate nominative and predicate adjective:

State of being verbs don't have direct objects. They have predicate nominatives (nouns) or predicate adjectives. They are the part of the sentence that equals the subject.

Billy is my <i>friend</i> .	Billy= <i>friend</i> . (predicate nominative)
Billy is <i>tall</i> .	Billy= <i>tall</i> . (predicate adjective)

Apposition:

An apposition occurs when two names for the same person or thing are placed side by side.

To *me*, the *very least of all saints*, this grace was given.
After listening to the *message of truth*, the *gospel of your salvation*...
Although they know the *ordinance of God*, *that those who practice such things are worthy of death*, they not only do the same, but...

Direct address:

Direct address occurs when a person or group of people are spoken to by name. It has no direct grammatical relationship to the rest of the sentence.

Consider it all joy, *my brethren*, when you encounter various trials...
O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you...

Developing words or modifiers:

Developing words include adjectives, adverbs, and groups of words that act like them. They are servants, not kings. They serve other words by describing, limiting, or qualifying them.

Billy caught the *red* ball.
Billy caught the ball *that ricocheted off the head of the opposing side's most prolific goal-scorer*.

What develops the noun *ball* in these two examples? In the first, it is the word *red*. In the second, it is the group of words *that ricocheted off the head of the opposing side's most prolific goal-scorer*. Although there are twelve words following *ball*, they all work together to describe which ball Billy caught.

GROUPS OF WORDS

Like all writers, the Bible's authors grouped their words together in three different ways: phrases, clauses, and paragraphs. These are the trailers, buses, and airplanes of how God transports truth to human beings.

PHRASES

A *phrase* is a group of words that works together, but *does not* contain a verb. Since phrases don't have a verb, they can't be the main part of the sentence; they always develop something else. Phrases are like a trailer that is towed behind a bus to haul extra luggage on a long trip. The trailer can't go by itself, but at the same time, you don't want to lose the trailer because there's a lot of important stuff in those suitcases. Because they can't go by themselves, trailers (participles, prepositions, and infinitives) always serve some other part of the sentence.

Participle phrase: We give thanks to God always for all of you, *making mention of you in our prayers*.
(The participle phrase explains either when or how Paul gave thanks.)

Prepositional phrase: Most prepositional phrases develop verbs.

He eagerly searched <i>for me</i> .	(for whom he searched)
He came and preached peace <i>to you</i> ...	(to whom he preached)
<i>by grace</i> you have been saved	(how you were saved)
We were dead <i>in our transgressions</i>	(where we were dead)

Some prepositions develop nouns.

Paul, an apostle <i>of Christ Jesus</i>	(which apostle)
the truth <i>about Jesus</i>	(which truth)
people <i>without hope</i>	(which people)

Infinitive phrase: He is able *to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day*.
(The infinitive *to guard* develops the idea of God's ability, explaining what He is able to do.)

CLAUSES

A *clause* is a group of words that has both a *subject and a verb*. A clause is like a bus: it carries more passengers than a phrase; therefore, it is more important. Clauses divide into two kinds of buses, those that can drive by themselves and those that can't. Those that can drive by themselves are called *main* clauses; those that can't are called *dependent* or *developing* clauses.

MAIN CLAUSES

A main clause stands by itself as a complete thought even if other parts of the sentence are subtracted. It can drive by itself. For example, consider the sentence *Paul preached until the sun went down*. The words *Paul preached* stand by themselves as a complete thought. We can add or subtract the words *until the sun went down*, but *Paul preached* remains complete. It is the main clause.

We could also say *Paul preached to the Corinthians*. In this case, *Paul preached* is towing a trailer, a prepositional phrase (*to the Corinthians*). The subject and verb, *Paul preached*, don't need that extra luggage to drive; they go by themselves. However, we're glad those suitcases are along for the ride; they tell us to whom Paul was preaching. Main clauses drive by themselves; the rest of the sentence develops or serves them.

DEPENDENT OR DEVELOPING CLAUSES

Paul preached	<i>until the sun went down.</i>
(main)	(developing)

The words *until the sun went down* are a dependent or developing clause. They can't drive by themselves. When you take away *Paul preached*, they stand by the side of the road waiting for a tow truck. Here are three more examples:

<i>Until I come,</i>	[you] give attention to the public reading of Scripture.
(developing)	(main)

All <i>who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus</i>	will be persecuted.
(developing)	(main)

Take up the full armor of God	<i>so that you will be able to resist in the evil day.</i>
(main)	(developing)

Where do you think the author's main point will be—in the main clause or in the developing clause? It's not a trick question: the author's main point will always be in the main

clause. Therefore, sharpening your ability to separate a main clause from its developing clauses is one of the most important things you'll do as a Bible interpreter. You can't preach for God until you know what His main thought is. Once you've found that main thought, you can handle the sword of the Spirit with the skill of a master swordsman, but not before. In the next chapter, you'll find a number exercises to help you develop this important skill.

PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph is a group of sentences that work together to address one topic. A paragraph is like an airplane: it has three hundred passengers, but they are all going to the same destination. For example, Ephesians 5:22-6:9 consists of six short paragraphs. Each one speaks to a different group of people.

- | | |
|----------------|----------|
| 1. Eph 5:22-24 | wives |
| 2. Eph 5:25-33 | husbands |
| 3. Eph 6:1-3 | children |
| 4. Eph 6:4 | fathers |
| 5. Eph 6:5-8 | slaves |
| 6. Eph 6:9 | masters |

A paragraph's theme will usually be found in the opening sentence or two; the sentences that follow work together to develop that theme. For example, the paragraph addressing husbands opens: "Husbands, love your wives" (Eph 5:25). The theme of a husband's love for his wife is then developed in the rest of the paragraph by focusing his attention on the example of Christ's love for the church.

TOW BARS AND DEVELOPING CLAUSES

To pull a trailer you need a tow bar, something to connect the trailer or the rear portion of an articulated bus to the main vehicle. The same is true of developing clauses. They don't go

unless they are hitched to the main clause with a tow bar. We'll call these tow bars *connector words*. Let's go back to our sentence, *Paul preached until the sun went down*.

Paul preached the sun went down.
Paul preached *until* the sun went down.

What is the tow bar that links *Paul preached* with its developing clause? The word *until*. It shows that the second clause works for the first. Developing clauses are almost always marked by a tow bar or connector words.

Furthermore, when you change the connector word, you change the meaning of the sentence.

Paul preached *because* the people believed.
Paul preached *so that* the people believed.
Paul preached *until* the people believed.
Paul preached *unless* the people believed.
Paul preached *if* the people believed.

In each case, changing the tow bar changes the meaning of the sentence. The first sentence emphasizes *why* Paul preached; the second emphasizes the *result* of his preaching. The third sentence tells *how long* Paul preached. The last two sentences give different *conditions* under which Paul would or would not preach.

The authors of the Bible used connector words and developing clauses all the time. In fact, they used them so much that if you can't identify them and the work they're doing, you can't interpret the Bible accurately. On the next two pages you'll find a list of the most important kinds of developing clauses and the tow bars that mark them. Outside of the Bible, these are the two most important pages in your library. I'm not exaggerating. To be a good interpreter, you must master these pages. You should become so familiar with them that at any point you can stop and say, "That's a purpose clause," or "That's a result clause." It's no different than a bricklayer saying, "Those are the bricks; this is a trowel; that's a wheelbarrow, and there's the mortar." Words and language are your tools. Learn them so that you can preach for God.

Study the following types of clauses and their tow bars (the tow bars or connector words are given in **bold**). As you do so, remember that connector words can also serve as a tow bar hitching together two sentences. In other words, they mark the relationships *between* sentences just as well as they mark the relationships *within* a sentence.

TYPES OF CLAUSES

Relative: Acts as an adjective, describing a noun or pronoun.
(**who, which, whom, that.**) These tow bars are sometimes combined with prepositions: *by which, in which, among whom, etc.*

- He has fixed a day **in which** *He will judge the world.*
- God, **who** *cannot lie...*
- The God **who** *made the world and all things in it...* does not dwell in temples made with hands.

Temporal: Tells *when* the action of the main clause is happening.
(**when, while, after, then, since, before, as, etc.**)

- **When** *they heard of the resurrection of the dead,* some began to sneer.
- His spirit was provoked within him **as** *he was observing the city full of idols.*

Purpose: Describes the *purpose* or goal of the verb it develops.
(**in order that, that, so that**)

- Christ Jesus...gave Himself for us, **that** *He might redeem us...*
- They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, **so that** *they might accuse him.*

Result: Describes the *result* of the clause it develops.
(**therefore, as a result, so, thus, so that**)

- God has not given us a spirit of timidity...**therefore,** *do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord.*
- All these things shall be added to you. **Therefore,** *do not be anxious for tomorrow...*

Causal: Expresses the *reason* for the action of the verb it develops.
(**because, for, since**)

- He felt compassion for them, **because** *they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd.*
- He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, **for** *He existed before me.*
- You husbands in the same way, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, **since** *she is a woman.*

Explanatory: Explains the preceding thought—often very close to causal.
(**for, you see, that is, namely**)

- May it never be! **For otherwise**, how will God judge the world?

Contrast: Contrasts something with what was just said.
(**but, yet, nevertheless**)

- Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, **but** only such a word as is good for edification...

Conditional: Establishes a condition that must be true before the main clause will come to pass. (**if, unless**)

- I will come to you soon, **if** *the Lord wills.*
- **If** *the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming*, he would have been on the alert ...

Comparison: Introduces a comparison.
(**as, even as, just as, so**)

- Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, **just as** *God in Christ also has forgiven you.*

Concessive: Introduces something slightly surprising in light of the main clause.
(**although, though, even though**)

- In this you greatly rejoice, **even though** *now for a little while...you have been distressed by various trials...*
- **Although** *He existed in the form of God*, He did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped...

Sequential: Used often in narrative, it expresses progress in the story.
(**then, now**)

- The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; **then** He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place.

Noun: A group of words acting like a noun, most often found as a direct object or as an apposition. Used regularly with the verbs *know* and *pray*, giving the content of the knowledge or the prayer. (**that, what**)

- For this you know with certainty, **that** *no immoral or impure person ... has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.*
- I pray **that** *the eyes of your heart will be enlightened.*

Note: There is an exercise at the end of this chapter that will give you practice at identifying and naming these clauses.

PARTICIPLE PHRASES

Participles work the same way clauses do, except that the connector words are often implied by the context rather than directly stated. In the examples below, I've noted the implied connections.

Purpose: Expresses the purpose of the verb.

- Let us see if Elijah comes [*for the purpose of*] saving him.

Temporal: Establishes the time of the verb.

- Seeing [*when they saw*] the star, they rejoiced.

Causal: Expresses the reason for the action of the verb.

- They received Him, seeing [*because they saw*] all that He did.

Conditional: Used as the *if* portion of an *if-then* statement.

- How shall we escape, neglecting [*if we neglect*] so great a salvation?

Concessive: Introduces something that makes the action of the verb slightly surprising.

- ...and he went out, not knowing [*even though he did not know*] where he was going.

Instrumental: Indicates the means by which an action is accomplished.

- Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, [*by means of*] fixing our eyes on Jesus...

Circumstantial: Expresses something that takes place at the same time as the verb.

- They went forth, [*at the same time*] preaching everywhere.

CLAUSE EXERCISE

Practice is important; therefore, I want you to complete the following exercise. Read each verse below, giving special attention to the clauses in *italics*. Using the clause pages you just studied as your guide, write the name of each italicized clause in the space provided. There is an answer key at the end of the exercise so that you can check your answers.

Example:

Those ¹*who wait for the Lord* will gain new strength.

Who marks a relative clause. Therefore, the answer is:

1. relative clause

Exercises:

No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, ¹*so that he may please the one* ²*who enlisted him as a soldier*.

1. _____

2. _____

³*If we confess our sins*, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

3. _____

But avoid worldly and empty chatter, ⁴for it will lead to further ungodliness.

4. _____

He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, ⁵so that he will have something to share with one who has need.

5. _____

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman ⁶who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

6. _____

And ⁷although they know the ordinance of God, ⁸that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those ⁹who practice them.

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

Also ¹⁰if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize ¹¹unless he competes according to the rules.

10. _____

11. _____

But thanks be to God ¹²that ¹³though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching ¹⁴to which you were committed.

12. _____

13. _____

14. _____

Retain the standard of sound words ¹⁵which you have heard from me, in the faith and love ¹⁶which are in Christ Jesus.

15. _____

16. _____

¹⁷"Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, ¹⁸yet ¹⁹because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection."

17. _____

18. _____

19. _____

²⁰Now ²¹after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem.

20. _____

21. _____

For this you know with certainty, ²²that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, ²³who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

22. _____

23. _____

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ²⁴*so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*

24. _____

"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord, ²⁵*Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; ²⁶though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool."*

25. _____ 26. _____

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, ²⁷*so that it will give grace to those who hear.*

27. _____

We know that we have passed out of death into life, ²⁸*because we love the brethren.*

28. _____

Whoever confesses ²⁹*that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.*

29. _____

The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, ³⁰*for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains.*

30. _____

For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, ³¹*so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.*

31. _____

But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, ³²*as is proper among saints.*

32. _____

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through ³³*what has been made, ³⁴so that they are without excuse.*

33. _____ 34. _____

ANSWER KEY:

1. Purpose—telling why a soldier doesn't entangle himself.
2. Relative—describing *one*.
3. Conditional—confessing is the condition for forgiveness.
4. Causal—explaining why to avoid such *chatter*.
5. Purpose—identifying the goal of the ex-thief's labor.
6. Relative—describes which workman: the unashamed one.
7. Concessive—in spite of their knowledge, they still sin.
8. Noun—an apposition renaming the ordinance of God.
9. Relative—telling which *those*.
10. Conditional—competing is the condition required for being eligible to win the prize.
11. Conditional—competing according to the rules is the condition required to win the prize.
12. Noun—the content of the thanksgiving.
13. Concessive—in spite of their previous slavery to sin, they obeyed.
14. Relative—describes which teaching: the one they were committed to.
15. Relative—describes which words to retain: those heard from Paul.
16. Relative—describing which faith and love: the ones found in Christ Jesus.
17. Concessive—in spite of the fact that he does not fear God, the judge will give protection.
18. Contrast—contrasts the judge's lack of fear with his intent to provide protection.
19. Causal—explains why the judge will give the unexpected protection.
20. Sequential—advances the story.
21. Temporal—tells when the magi came.
22. Noun—in apposition with *this*, giving the content of the knowledge.
23. Relative—describes the coveter as an idol worshiper, bowing before that which he covets.
24. Result—the complete equipping of God's man is the result of the inspiration and profitability of Scripture. It could also be interpreted as a purpose clause.
25. Concessive—in spite of their scarlet sin, the whiteness of the main clause will result.

26. Concessive—in spite of redness of their sin, woolly whiteness will be given.
27. Purpose—the reason for speaking the edifying word.
28. Causal—explains why we are certain we are spiritually alive.
29. Noun—direct object of the verb *confesses*.
30. Causal—tells why Onesiphorus was a worthy candidate for mercy.
31. Purpose—tells why Paul endured so many sufferings: the salvation of God's elect.
32. Comparison—equates the verbal restraint of the main clause with saintly behavior.
33. Noun—object of the preposition *through*; the same as saying "through creation."
34. Result—God's self-revelation makes sinners' guilt indefensible.

CHAPTER SIX

STRIPPING A SENTENCE

Have you ever seen a car that has been stripped by thieves? All that is left is the body, the frame, and the engine. The radio, seats, and steering wheel have been ripped out of the interior. The wheels, lights, wipers, and muffler have been removed from the outside. The battery, spark plugs, and air filter have been stolen from the under the bonnet. In fact, all that's left are the most basic components of the vehicle—the stuff too big to move.

While I normally discourage criminal activity of all kinds, in this section I want to teach you to strip a sentence. I want to teach you to remove all the secondary components—spark plugs, wiper blades, and wheels—so that you can isolate the main part of a sentence, the author's *dominant thought*. The dominant thought is the main part of the main clause. It is the part of the sentence that stands by itself as a complete thought. If you take away the other parts of the sentence, it still makes sense.

Consider the two sentences from the last chapter: *Paul preached until the sun went down* and *Paul preached to the Corinthians*. Let's strip them of their developing words.

Paul preached ~~until the sun went down~~.

Paul preached ~~to the Corinthians~~.

What is the dominant thought of those two sentences? *Paul preached*. Why is that important? If you were to preach those sentences, your theme wouldn't be sunsets or people who live in Corinth. Your theme would be Paul's preaching. People who live in Corinth and sunsets are important only because they explain to whom Paul preached and when Paul preached. To prove that *Paul preached* is the dominant thought of those sentences, let's try crossing it out, and see what remains.

~~Paul preached~~ until the sun went down.

~~Paul preached~~ to the Corinthians.

Do the remaining words form a complete thought? They don't. When you took away *Paul preached*, you didn't strip the car; you hauled away the body, frame, and engine—the things that make a car a car or a sentence a sentence. When you cross out *Paul preached*, what remains are spare parts. To preach for God, your sermon must always be built around the dominant thought of the passage, not the spare parts. You find that dominant thought by stripping away all the parts of the sentence that don't go by themselves: prepositions, participles, infinitives, and developing clauses. Let's start by learning to strip a sentence of its prepositions.

FINDING AND STRIPPING PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions are words that highlight relationships. Many highlight a *physical* relationship: *on* the house, *under* the house, *beside* the house, *outside* the house. Other prepositions highlight *time* relationships: *after* the sermon, *before* the sermon, *during* the sermon. A few prepositions identify *general* or *abstract* relationships: *about* the truth, *of* the Lord, *according to* the Bible. Read through the list of prepositions provided below, so that you will be able to identify them in the exercises that follow.³⁶

Physical relationships:

above	over	up	down	below	under
beneath	near	by	off	on	next to
with	in	inside	into	out	outside
beside	around	along	between	across	through
throughout	past	to	toward	from	against
at	behind				

³⁶ This list of prepositions is adapted from a list in Wanda C. Phillips, *Easy Grammar: Grades 4 and 5* (Scottsdale, Arizona: Easy Grammar Systems, 1996), 1.

Time relationships:

before during until after

General or abstract relationships:

about for as of except according to
without with

Having reviewed that list of common prepositions, now let's practice stripping them from a sentence in order to find the dominant thought. Using sentences from Paul's letter to the Philippians, we'll strip away the prepositional phrases by drawing a line through them. That doesn't mean that they aren't important; we're just indicating that they aren't the dominant thought. The prepositions are in **bold**.

~~In this~~ I rejoice.

Dominant thought: Paul's rejoicing.

I thank my God ~~in all my remembrance of~~ you.

Dominant thought: Paul's thanks to God

~~In the defense and confirmation of the gospel,~~ you all are partakers ~~of grace with~~ me.

Dominant thought: the shared partaking of Paul and the Philippians

I long ~~for you all with the affection of~~ Christ Jesus.

Dominant thought: Paul's longing

He predestined us ~~to adoption as sons through~~ Jesus Christ ~~to Himself,~~ **according to** the kind intention ~~of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace...~~

Dominant thought: God's predestining work

What remains when you strip a sentence is the heart of the main clause: the main verb, its subject, and its direct object (if it has one). With state of being verbs, what remains is the verb, its subject, and the subject's predicate noun or predicate adjective.

We can employ the same stripping away process with participles and infinitives.*

I am hard-pressed ~~from both directions~~, ~~having the desire to depart~~ and be ~~with Christ...~~

preposition participle infinitives preposition

~~Being found in appearance as a man~~, He humbled Himself ~~by becoming obedient to the point of death.~~

participle

preposition

What is the main thought of this verse? Christ's humbling of Himself. All the other words develop that thought.

I am amply supplied, ~~having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent...~~

participle preposition

DEVELOPING CLAUSES

We can strip developing clauses from a sentence the same way, leaving behind only the dominant thought of the main clause. When stripping away developing clauses, the key is finding the tow bars or connector words that start them. Once you've found its tow bar, a developing clause can't escape your pencil. Let's look at some more examples. The connector words are in **bold**.

* Occasionally a gerund or an infinitive phrase will be the subject or direct object of a sentence. If so, don't strip it; it is part of the dominant thought. Example: "*To write the same things again* is no trouble to me..." In this case, the infinitive *to write* is the subject of *is*. The dominant thought is *to write is no trouble*.

~~If anyone thinks he is something~~ **when** ~~he is nothing~~, he deceives himself.

conditional

temporal

Notice that we did not cross out *himself*, the direct object. We'll include it as part of the dominant thought. The same is true with the word *heart* in the next example.

Let us not lose heart ~~in doing good~~, **for** ~~in due time we shall reap~~ **if** ~~we do not grow weary~~.

causal

conditional

I press on **in order that** I may lay hold of that **for which** also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.

purpose

relative

Once you remove the purpose clause and its relative clause, you find that the dominant thought of the sentence is Paul's pressing on. In this case, we did not cross out *on* because it is an adverb describing *press*, not a preposition.

Observe those **who** walk according to the pattern you have in us.

relative

After removing the relative clause that develops the word *those*, the dominant thought is observing people.

Not that I speak ~~from want~~, **for** ~~I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am~~.

explanatory

The *for* clause explains why Paul can speak without want.

This I pray, **that** ~~your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment~~.

noun

That starts a noun clause that gives the content of Paul's prayer. The whole noun clause is in apposition with the word *this*.

~~Even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith,~~ I rejoice ... concessive

God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name ~~which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...~~ relative
purpose

EXERCISES

Now that you've seen some examples of how to strip a sentence in order to isolate the dominant thought, I want you to practice this important skill. In the exercises below, strip each sentence of all its developing words, including prepositions, infinitives, participles, and developing clauses. You can cross them out lightly with a pencil (unless this is a library book!). Do the exercises carefully: this skill is critical to block diagramming. I've done the first sentence for you. When you are done, check your work against the answer key that follows.

EXERCISE 1: MATTHEW'S GOSPEL

1. ~~Unless you are converted and become like children,~~ you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.
2. If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.
3. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.
4. Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you.
5. When they came to the multitude, a man came up to Him, falling on his knees before Him.

6. Sending away the multitudes, He got into the boat, and came to the region of Magadan.
7. Departing from there, Jesus went along by the Sea of Galilee, and having gone up to the mountain, He was sitting there.
8. Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.
9. Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known.
10. Seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd.
11. You shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.
12. If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you.

ANSWER KEY

1. ~~Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.~~
2. ~~If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.~~
3. ~~For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.~~
4. ~~Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you.~~
5. ~~When they came to the multitude, a man came up to Him, falling on his knees before Him.~~
6. ~~Sending away the multitudes, He got into the boat, and came to the region of Magadan.~~
7. ~~Departing from there, Jesus went along by the Sea of Galilee, and having gone up to the mountain, He was sitting there.~~
8. ~~Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.~~

9. ~~Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known.~~
10. ~~Seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd.~~
11. You shall call His name Jesus, ~~for it is He who will save His people from their sins.~~
12. ~~If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you.~~

EXERCISE 2: ROMANS

To isolate the dominant thought of these verses, strip each sentence of its developing words, including prepositions, infinitives, participles, and developing clauses. Do so by crossing them out lightly with a pencil until all that remains is the dominant thought.

1. For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established.
2. Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.
3. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper.
4. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God.
5. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.
6. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance.
7. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
8. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.
9. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.
10. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed?

11. For the outcome of those things is death.
12. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

ANSWER KEY

1. For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established.
2. Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.
3. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper.
4. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God.
5. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.
6. And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance.
7. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.
8. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.
9. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him.
10. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed?
11. For the outcome of those things is death.
12. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Sentence number twelve is Romans 8:1. If you were to preach that verse, what would your theme be? It would be God's theme: no condemnation. You need the developing words, *for those who are in Christ Jesus*, to fill out the thought—they specify who will not be condemned.

However, the dominant thought is found in the main clause: no condemnation. And what a great thought it is for those who have believed in Christ!

CHAPTER SEVEN

BLOCK DIAGRAMMING

While I was in seminary, I had the privilege of sitting under the teaching of John MacArthur, one of the great preachers of our era. When he spoke, it was as if God were speaking again. Texts I had not understood became clear. He made me think grand thoughts about God, Christ, and salvation, thoughts that I had never thought before. I loved the relentless detail of his sermons; I loved his ingenious way of breaking down and explaining complex texts. He did not preach *around* God's word or *about* God's word. He preached God's words—the text of Scripture itself. He fed us the grain of God, not the straw of men.

How do great preachers do it? What is their secret? Some of it is just extraordinary spiritual gifting. The Holy Spirit fills each preacher's cup of spiritual giftedness to the level He chooses, and it is a delightful fact that He fills the cups of some men all the way to the brim. You and I can't mimic or copy that. However, we can imitate the study methods that outstanding preachers use to produce their sermons.

Not-so-great preachers use a variety of shameful methods to study God's word, methods you should never imitate. Some use what I call the *morning news method*. They prepare their sermons by watching the television news or by reading the morning newspaper, and then they preach up a thunderstorm of opinions based on whatever they heard or read. Other preachers use the Bible, but they do so by using the *shoplifting method*: grab a favorite word from the text and run. The context is ignored, and the whole sermon focuses on what the preacher wants to say about a certain word, rather than focusing on what the biblical author wanted to say when he used that word.

I once suffered through a sermon supposedly covering 2 Corinthians 2:1-11 in which the preacher shoplifted the words, "I wrote," from verse nine, and preached that Christians should imitate Paul by being faithful letter writers. He completely ignored what Paul wrote, life-changing

instruction about forgiving a repentant brother. Instead, he snatched, "I wrote," from the text and made his sermon about writing letters. Disastrous.

Another method, similar to the shoplifting method, is the *eisegesis method*. What does eisegesis mean? Eisegesis is the opposite of exegesis. Exegesis means to get God's meaning *out of* a text (*ex* means *out of*, as in *exit* or *exodus*). Therefore, eisegesis (from *eis* or *into*) means to read your own meaning *into* a text. Christians practice eisegesis every time they say, "What this text means to me is..." They are injecting their meaning into the text, rather than drawing God's meaning out of it.

Preachers often combine the eisegesis method with the *Holy Spirit method* discussed earlier. By mixing the two, they don't feel guilty for imposing their unstudied guesses on God's word; after all, their inaccurate interpretation was from God's Spirit. Bad preachers also regularly rely on what I call the "*Help me, Jesus!*" method. It's Saturday night and you didn't discipline yourself to study that week; therefore, all you can do is cry out, "Help me, Jesus!" and hope that the Lord will give you a sermon in the morning. Diligent, unashamed, God-approved workmen don't use those methods to prepare sermons. What method do they use?

ALTERNATIVES

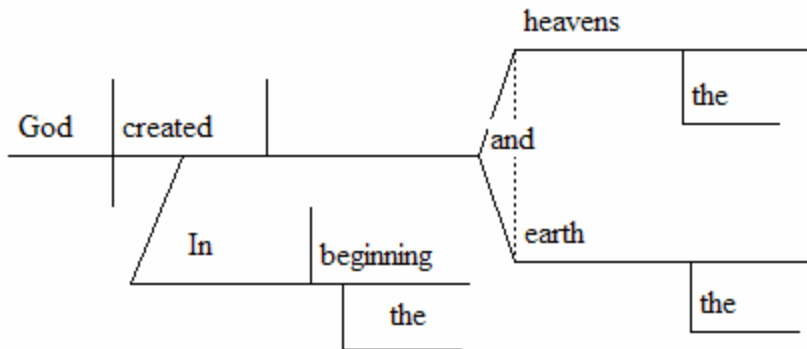
There are different, legitimate ways of studying God's word. For example, in seminary I was taught two different study methods. One of those methods I found quite suitable for studying a passage in order to write a technical Bible commentary. For some of my professors this method worked quite well, probably because that's exactly what they did—they wrote technical commentaries and seminary journal articles. However, it was a method that (in my estimation) wasn't very helpful for preparing sermons. It produced a lot of disconnected facts about a passage, but for a sermon I wanted tightly connected facts. I needed to understand the flow of the passage, not just accumulate a mass of details about it.

Therefore, while in seminary I embraced a second method, the one I am teaching you in this chapter. It is called *diagramming*. What is a diagram? It's a picture of the grammar and syntax

of a Bible passage. It shows you how the author put his text together. It's a way of arranging the words of Scripture on a page so that you can easily see what the author's dominant thought was and how he developed that thought. A block diagram forces you to measure every piece of the text before you start cutting. Thomas Schreiner writes, "One of the great values of diagramming, then, is that it compels the interpreter to slow down and think carefully through every decision of the text."³⁷ Diagramming sharpens the knife of careful reading to a razor's edge.

There are two different ways to diagram a text of Scripture. One is *line* diagramming; the other is *block* diagramming.* Below is an example of each.

Line Diagram



Block Diagram

God created the heavens
and
the earth

in the beginning

³⁷ Thomas Schreiner, *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990), 77-78. Schreiner is referring to line diagramming, but his point also applies to block diagramming.

* It is called *block* diagramming because it breaks down a passage into small blocks of text, positioning each block to show how it relates to the rest of the sentence or paragraph.

Both methods accomplish the same thing in the end—they force you to think very carefully about each word or group of words in a text. The strength of line diagramming is that it is slightly more detailed than block diagramming. However, early in my ministry I converted to block diagramming for three reasons. First, in long passages, a line diagram can be quite awkward to work with: too many lines, sticks, and stilts. Second, block diagramming is quicker because you don't waste time looking up which lines to use in order to represent obscure grammatical constructions. Third, block diagramming goes more quickly simply because you don't spend time drawing lines: sermon preparation is hard enough without turning it into an exercise in applied geometry. If you prefer to use line diagramming, God's blessings be upon you—it's an excellent method for studying God's word in detail. In fact, learning to line diagram provides a superb background for block diagramming. However, in this book, we'll stick to block diagramming: it's easier to learn, faster to use, and accomplishes the same thing in the end.

What does it accomplish? Block diagramming makes you look at a Bible passage like a mechanically minded boy studying a lawnmower engine. When the engine sits in front of him in its assembled state, he can't quite see how it works. But after taking the engine to bits, when he has all the pieces laid out, he exclaims, "Oh, *now* I see how it works!" A block diagram accomplishes the same thing: it takes the text to bits so that the preacher can exclaim, "Now I see how Genesis 1:1 works!" And if you see how the text works, you've taken a critical step towards preaching for God.

BLOCK DIAGRAMMING

Words are very effective things, but they do have limitations. For example, is it easier to learn how to tie your shoelaces by listening to a lecture on how to tie shoelaces or by watching someone actually do it? When it comes to tying your shoes, watching (and then doing it yourself) is far better than hearing a lecture about knots and bows. In the same way, it's easier to learn block diagramming by seeing it done. Therefore, I'll start with a short description of how to block diagram, but if it sounds confusing, don't panic. I'll quickly move to showing you how to do it.

Finally, you'll get some opportunities to do it yourself in the next chapter. Trust me: if you can tie your shoes, you can block diagram.

Block diagramming has two basic steps:

1. Write the dominant thought—the main verb, its subject, and direct object* (if it has one)—on the left hand margin.
2. Write the words that develop the dominant thought underneath and to the right of the dominant thought. Be sure to line up developing words directly underneath the words they develop or describe.

Sound complicated? It won't be when you see it. Let's start with step one. Before you can write the dominant thought on the left-hand margin, you must first decide what the dominant thought is. That's why we practiced stripping a sentence in the last chapter. The dominant thought is the part of a sentence that stands by itself as a complete thought. Let's strip Genesis 1:1.

GENESIS 1:1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

What words in this sentence stand by themselves as a complete thought? If you strip away all the "unnecessary" words as you practiced in the last chapter, what you are left with is *God created*. That's the core of the sentence. You can say it without having to add anything else: *God created*. The rest of the words simply explain when God created and what He created. Therefore, God's creating act is the dominant thought.

To start a block diagram of Genesis 1:1, you write *God created* on the left-hand margin. You can also add the direct object of God's creating: *the heavens and the earth*. To show that God created two things, you can write it like this:

*As you learned in the grammar chapter, stative verbs like *is*, *was*, and *be* are followed by predicate nominatives (nouns) and predicate adjectives rather than direct objects. To keep these instructions simple, here I'll speak only of active verbs, but you do the same thing if you are working with a stative verb and its predicate nominative or predicate adjective.

God created the heavens
and
the earth

But what about the rest of the verse? In step two, write the words that develop the dominant thought underneath it and to the right. Developing words go directly underneath the words they serve. In Genesis 1:1, the developing words are *in the beginning*. They tell you when God created. Since *in the beginning* develops the verb *created*, it is written underneath it. It is also indented from the left-hand margin to show that it is in a serving role. This makes it clear that *created* is the dominant thought, and that *in the beginning* is a developing thought.

God created the heavens
and
the earth

in the beginning

GALATIANS 6:1

Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted.

What is the dominant thought of this sentence? This example is harder than Genesis 1:1 because there are a lot more verb options. As you read, you'll find that there are five verb-like words in Galatians 6:1: *is caught, are, restore, looking, be tempted*. On the verse written out above this paragraph, use your pencil to strip away the direct address, the developing clauses, and the prepositional phrases. When you're done, compare it to the example below and see how you did.

~~Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted.~~

Hopefully you came up with *you ... restore such a one*. All the other options develop or depend on something else. They can't drive by themselves, but the command, *you ... restore*, can. Therefore, it is the dominant thought of Galatians 6:1. What does discovering that do for you? By identifying the dominant thought, you know that *restoration* was Paul's message when he wrote this verse. You might want to teach about temptation, spirituality, or gentleness. Those are all great topics; however, if you want to teach what God said when Paul wrote this verse, then your theme will have to be the restoration of a sinner.

To diagram Galatians 6:1, start with the dominant thought on the left-hand column:

you restore such a one

That accomplished, we move to step two: write the words that develop the dominant thought underneath it and to the right. Developing words go directly underneath the words they serve.

brethren*

you restore such a one
who are spiritual

even if a man is caught in any trespass

in a spirit of gentleness

looking

to yourselves

lest you too be tempted

* Direct addresses, such as *brethren*, don't fit in the flow of a sentence. They are placed above the main verb, as shown here.

Notice that each part of Galatians 6:1 has been arranged to indicate what it develops. *Who are spiritual* describes *you*. Therefore, it is placed underneath *you* and indented slightly. The words *even if...*, *in a spirit...*, and *looking...*, all develop the command *you restore*. Therefore, they are placed under *restore*. You can train your mental ear to identify these relationships as you read a sentence. How? By repeating the main verb before each developing thought.

You restore ... even if a man is caught in any trespass

You restore ... in a spirit of gentleness

You restore ... looking to yourselves lest you also be tempted

MULTIPLE SENTENCES

Most of the time the text you are preaching will be longer than one sentence. If that is the case, you have two options when block diagramming it. If all the sentences are of equal importance to the thought of the paragraph, you can begin them all on the left-hand margin. In the case of our next example, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, all three commands are of equal importance. One command does not work for the others; all are kings; none are servants. Therefore, we'll place all three on the left-hand margin. The words that develop them (*always, without ceasing, in everything*) are servants; therefore, they are indented. I have also indented *for this is the will of God...* It is working for the last command, perhaps even all three commands. It is not a king; it is a servant. It tells you why you must rejoice, pray, and give thanks.

Rejoice

always

Pray

without ceasing

Give thanks

in everything

for
this is the will of God

for you
in Christ Jesus

In many cases, one sentence will develop another sentence. Consider the two complete sentences that start Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.* What is the relationship between them? I would suggest *result*. As a result of the Lord's shepherding, *I shall not want.* The dominant thought is the Lord's shepherding; lacking nothing is the result. In the example below, I have added the words *as a result* in brackets to show the author-intended relationship between the two sentences.

The Lord is my shepherd
[*as a result*]
I shall not want

While both sentences are complete thoughts, it is clear that the second sentence develops the first. It's not quite a servant, but it's not quite a king either. Maybe it's a prince. Such relationships between sentences are just as critical as the relationships within a sentence. Let me say that again: relationships *between* sentences are just as critical as the relationships *within* a sentence. Usually authors mark the connection between sentences with words such as *therefore*, *since*, *for*, or *but*. However, as in Psalm 23:1, poetry often does not state connections; it leaves it to you, the reader, to supply them.

The apostle Paul, on the other hand, loves connector words, and scatters them throughout his paragraphs as liberally as a sower scattering seed on a field. For example, Romans 1:15 and 16 are distinct sentences, but the *for* that begins verse 16 shows that in verse 16 Paul is

explaining why he is so eager to preach the gospel to the Romans (v. 15). To reflect this, I have indented the whole of verse 16 to show that it is working for verse 15.

I am eager (v. 15)
to preach the gospel
to you also
who
are in Rome.

For [because] (v. 16)
I am not ashamed
of the gospel
for
it is the power
of God
for salvation
to everyone
who believes
to the Jew first
and also
to the Greek.

SUMMARY OF BLOCK DIAGRAMMING

A block diagram is a wonderful tool for studying a passage of Scripture. It clearly distinguishes the dominant thought from the developing thoughts; it separates the kings from the servants. It traces the line of the author's argument by making you look closely at words like *because*, *therefore*, *if*, *after*, and *although*. All of those things are critical to careful Bible reading; they are critical to preaching for God.

MORE EXAMPLES

Let me give you a few more examples of block diagramming (the brackets on the right side of the page tell you how the developing thoughts are serving the dominant thought).

2 TIMOTHY 1:14

[You] guard	the treasure	[<i>dominant thought</i>]
	which has been entrusted	[<i>rel. cl.: which treasure</i>]
	to you	[<i>prep: to whom</i>]
	through the Holy Spirit	[<i>prep: how</i>]
	who dwells in us	[<i>relative cl.: which Spirit</i>]

1 TIMOTHY 3:14

I am writing	these things	
	to you	[<i>prep: to whom</i>]
	hoping to come	[<i>circumstantial participle</i>]
	to you	[<i>prep: to whom</i>]
	before long	[<i>prep: when</i>]

1 TIMOTHY 6:3-4

he is conceited	[<i>2 dominant thoughts</i>]
and	
understands nothing	
if	[<i>2 conditional clauses</i>]

anyone advocates a different doctrine	<i>explaining the situation in</i>
and	<i>in which the main clauses</i>
[if one]	<i>are true]</i>
does not agree	
with sound words←→those	[<i>apposition</i>]
of our Lord Jesus Christ	[<i>prep.: which words</i>]
and	
with the doctrine	[<i>prep</i>]
conforming to godliness	[<i>part.: which doctrine</i>]

CHAPTER EIGHT

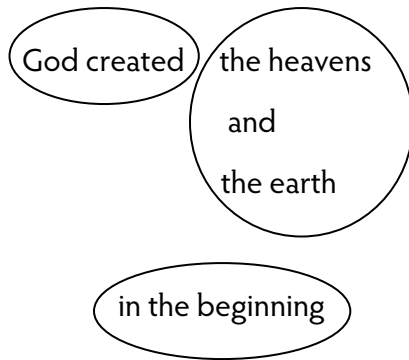
OUTLINING AND SUMMARIZING A TEXT

Is a block diagram all you need to prepare a good sermon? No, it isn't. You can't preach a block diagram. Therefore, you need a way to report what your diagram reveals. Furthermore, you must find a clear, accurate, and memorable way to tell to your congregation what you have discovered in your study. How can you do that?

INTERPRETATIONAL OUTLINES

Imagine two men standing by a fence, looking into a field. In that field are a variety of animals grazing contentedly. The first man (a city-dweller) looks at the second (a farmer), and asks, "Are those your animals?" The farmer replies, "Yes. That's my herd, and it's made up of seven cows, eleven sheep, and twenty-two goats." To make things simple for the city-dweller, the farmer divided his animals into three categories: cows, sheep, and goats. An interpretational outline does the same thing for a passage of Scripture. It takes the detailed information revealed by your block diagram and arranges it into simple, understandable categories. It lumps together the things that belong together: cows go with cows; sheep go with sheep, and so on.

Outlining a text can be a challenging task, but a block diagram helps: like a good sheep dog, your diagram has already sorted out the herd: sheep to the right; goats to the left; cows in the center. Therefore, to make an outline, you look at your diagram and redescribe each block of the text in your own words. Let's use Genesis 1:1 as an example.



The diagram has separated the herd of Genesis 1:1 into three groups—cows, sheep, and goats, if you will. Genesis 1:1 speaks of a Creator who creates a creation at a certain time. To make an outline that reflects that, you need to come up with a word or phrase that redescribes each group of words. Let's try this:

1. the Creator God
2. the creation the heavens and the earth
3. the chronology in the beginning

You can't preach a block diagram, but you could preach that outline. A block diagram serves your sermon as a foundation serves a building. When constructing a house, the foundation is the first thing you build. No one sees the foundation because it lies underground, but the whole structure rests upon it. In the same way, no one will ever see your block diagram of Genesis 1:1, but your whole sermon is built upon it.

Now let's consider Galatians 6:1. When you get the cows with the cows and the sheep with the sheep in Galatians 6:1, it looks like this:



The main verb establishes the dominant thought: restoration. How can you, using slightly different words than the text itself, describe the content of each of those circles? Here is an example:

- the committee of restoration *you who are spiritual*
- the culprit of restoration *such a one, i.e., the man caught in sin*
- the condition of restoration *even if a man is caught...*
- the compassion of restoration *in a spirit of gentleness*
- the caution of restoration *looking to yourselves...*

That, of course, is only your basic outline. Under some points there will be sub-points. For example, under the *committee of restoration*, you would speak about the committee's *qualification*: spiritual maturity.

In an earlier chapter, I quoted Walter Kaiser: "The whole objective ... is to let the Scriptures have the major, if not the only, role in determining the shape, logic, and development

of our message."³⁸ Have we accomplished that with our outlines of Genesis 1:1 and Galatians 6:1? Yes. God's word shaped those outlines like a potter's hand shapes the clay. Those outlines weren't imposed on the text from the outside. They came out of the text as smoothly as a banana comes out of its skin. If you were to preach from those outlines, you would be preaching for God because you are resaying what God said through Moses and Paul.

PLURAL NOUN SUMMARY

Let's go back to our two men looking at a herd of animals. The farmer could have said, "In my herd there is a brown cow that's missing one ear and a reddish cow that's got a crooked horn. There is a yellow goat with one black leg and another yellow goat with a bare patch on its right hip. There is a sheep with a cracked hoof on its right foreleg. There is a ..." You get the idea. Who can remember the hair, horns, and hooves of forty animals in a field? Not I. That's too much information to handle, too many details. I need a summary.

It works the same way with a sermon. Your listeners' mental arms are not as long as a gorilla's. They can't wrap their minds around all the details of your sermon without a summary. They do need details—no one can understand the Bible without them. But for your congregation to make sense of those details, you'll need to provide them with a summary. A description of forty different animals in a field is perfectly understandable to the farmer who works with those animals every day. In the same way, the details of your passage make perfect sense to you—you've been studying your text all week. Your congregation, however, has not. When it comes to your text, they are city-dwellers who know nothing about animals.

In our example, the farmer's summary was, "In my herd there are three kinds of animals." That gives the city-dweller the big picture. Now if the farmer describes all forty animals individually, it won't be a mass of details; it will fit in three simple, sensible categories. Can you give your listeners a one-sentence, "In this herd there are three kinds of animals" breakdown of a

³⁸ Walter Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, 160.

Bible passage? Not only can you, but to be a good preacher, you must. How? By using your block diagram and your interpretational outline.

Early in their sermons, good preachers dig a hole, drop in a post, and erect a road sign that tells everyone exactly where the sermon is going (i.e., where the text is going): "In my herd (*sermon*), there are three kinds of animals (*three outline points*)."

Making a statement like that early in your sermon helps both you and your listeners. First, it keeps you from wandering. It keeps you from driving through Kenya to get from South Africa to Mozambique. It keeps you from turning down a side road and leaving your text behind altogether. A summary sentence also keeps your congregation from getting lost. A forty-five minute sermon is a long journey: give them a map and they'll follow you all the way.

There are different ways of summarizing a passage in one sentence. The one we'll use is called a *plural noun summary*. Our farmer already gave us an example of a plural noun summary: "In my herd there are three kinds of animals: cows, sheep, and goats."

Why is it called a *plural noun summary*? It's *plural* because your sermon will have more than one outline point—it might be two, three, four, or more, but it will be more than one. In this case, it is "*three* kinds of animals." It's a plural *noun* summary because it centers around a noun: "In my herd I have three *kinds* of animals," or "This passage teaches us four *truths* about Christ." It is a plural noun *summary* because it summarizes the whole passage in one sentence. It is your sermon in miniature; it is your sermon in pill form.

If you go to the shops and purchase ten oranges, is it easier to carry those oranges home loose or in a plastic bag? A bag makes the job a lot easier. In Genesis 1:1, there are only three oranges; nonetheless, it will help your listeners tremendously if you give them a plastic bag in which to carry them. Let's go back to our outline of Genesis 1:1, and see if we can get all three oranges into one convenient plastic bag.

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| 1. the Creator | God |
| 2. the creation | heavens/earth |
| 3. the chronology | in the beginning |

There are obviously going to be *three somethings* to summarize here. Try to think of a word that wraps its arms around all three of those points. If you are struggling, turn to Appendix 2 at the end of this book. There you will find three pages of plural nouns. In the early years of my ministry, I often checked a list like that one to find the best plural noun for my text.

Here is one way you could summarize our outline of Genesis 1:1: "In Genesis 1:1, God provides *three facts* about creation that you need to know in order to understand how you got here: *who* made it, *what* was made, and *when* it was made." If you wanted to be more controversial, you could say that Genesis 1:1 provides *three facts* that blow up the big bang theory. If you give your listeners a summary like that, they know from the start how the passage fits together; they know where each point is going; they have a framework in which to place the details.

THE PARTS OF A PLURAL NOUN SUMMARY

How do you make a plural noun summary? It has three parts: 1) a plural noun giving the number of main points, 2) a summary of the dominant thought of the passage, and 3) an application to capture the listeners' attention. Look closely at our summary of Genesis 1:1, and see if you can identify those three parts.

In Genesis 1:1, God gives three facts...

about creation...

that you need to know in order to understand how you got here.

This example includes all three parts of a good plural noun summary. First, there is plural noun (*three facts*) that sums up the main points. Second, *about creation* sums up the dominant thought of the passage as expressed in the verb *created*. Third, the listeners are told why they should listen to your sermon: *that you need to know...* Both interpretation and application are important in a sermon; therefore, a plural noun summary includes both: this is what the text is about; this is how it applies to you.

Now that you're starting to understand the different parts of a plural noun summary, let's take a shot at summarizing our outline of Galatians 6:1. There are going to be five oranges in this plastic bag:

1. the committee of restoration
2. the culprit of restoration
3. the condition of restoration
4. the compassion of restoration
5. the caution of restoration

In Galatians 6:1, Paul lists *five factors* ...

you need to consider when a sinning brother or sister in Christ...
needs to be restored to the paths of righteousness.

The number *five* tells your listeners how many animals there are in the field of Galatians 6:1, how many oranges there are in the bag. The middle line (*you need to consider...*) emphasizes application. The third line puts Paul's dominant thought, the restoration of a sinner, on top of a pole for all to see.

Making a sermon is like baking bread. The block diagram provides the wheat kernels, the rough information. The interpretational outline grinds that information into fine, usable flour. The plural noun summary bakes it into one tasty loaf. The result? The congregation is fed the grain of God.

SUMMARY

I never tire of hearing how a friend of mine became an expository preacher. Robert was saved in Venda in the northeast corner of South Africa. One day while listening to a Christian radio station, he heard a sermon by John MacArthur. He was intrigued by it, and started to listen

regularly. He quickly learned that at the outset of his sermons MacArthur always said something like this: "In this text we're going to discover five things about salvation."

Robert says, "When reading through the text at the start of MacArthur's sermon, I couldn't find those five things. But sure enough, after he was done preaching, there *were* five things there. I decided that if I was going to be a preacher, I needed to go to seminary to learn how to find the five things." Thankfully, Robert went to a good seminary where they taught him to diagram, and now he can find the five things (or however many "things" there are in that text).

A block diagram is an invaluable tool. It forces you to measure the sentences of Scripture accurately so that you can cut them straight. It allows the author's dominant thought to squeeze your sermon—the text is the potter, your sermon the clay. It forces you to say what God said. It guarantees that you are giving your congregation the grain of God, not the chaff of men.

CHAPTER NINE

STUDYING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The narrative or story sections of the Bible teach the same theology as the rest of Scripture, but they do so by showing you the pictures—theology in action. Bible stories are truth in movie form.³⁹ They take things that you can see, touch, taste, and feel, and give them captions to explain their significance.

For example, in Genesis 22 God teaches the doctrine of substitutionary atonement by showing you the pictures; He puts your imagination to work to enhance the learning process. As you read the story, Isaac's question is a punch in the stomach: "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" You hear Abraham's faith as he answers: "God will provide." You see the flash of sunlight on the knife as Abraham raises his arm to plunge the deadly point into the jugular vein of his only son. You are flooded with relief when God intervenes and provides a substitute, a ram providentially caught in a nearby thorn bush. You see substitution as you imagine Abraham untying Isaac and helping him down from the altar, and then slitting the throat of the ram and arranging its carcass on the altar instead. In Genesis 22, you hear, feel, and see the doctrine of substitution.

Congregations always enjoy sermons from biblical narrative because narratives recruit the imagination for the purpose of teaching theology. The truth is, we are all children at heart: we love stories. And in my experience, Africans have a special appreciation for stories beyond the ordinary. Therefore, to be a good expository preacher in Africa, you must master the art of preaching biblical narrative. But to preach for God, you must first study for God. How can you study the stories of the Bible so that you'll preach them the way God would preach them?

³⁹ Kenneth A. Mathews, "Preaching Historical Narratives," in *Reclaiming the Prophetic Mantle: Preaching the Old Testament Faithfully*, ed. by George Klein (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1992), 31-32.

THE GOAL OF PREACHING BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The goal of preaching biblical narrative is to *retell the biblical story in such a way that you teach the same theological lesson the original author was teaching*. Even in narrative you must resay what God said. Therefore, your first task is to retell God's story in an accurate, insightful, and compelling manner—just like God told it. But you must also tell the story for the same reason God told it, emphasizing its God-intended theological lesson. Let's start with studying to retell the story.

THE PLOT OR STORY LINE

Wherever you go in the world, stories work the same way. They start with a peaceful *situation* into which a problem or *tension* is introduced. A *solution* to that problem is sought, and in the end, there is *resolution*, a return to a peaceful situation. Scholars call this progression the *story line* or the *plot*.⁴⁰

The Bible itself follows that pattern; it has a problem-solution plot.* When you read the Bible, you find that its perfectly true story begins where most stories begin, with a peaceful initial *situation*. God creates a good world and appoints Adam and Eve as its caretakers. However, as in all stories, a problem or *tension* arises. Because of Adam's sin, God's good world is plunged into ruin. God refuses to allow that state of affairs to continue perpetually; therefore, a *solution* must be found. From Genesis 3 to Revelation 20, God gradually implements His solution, a solution that focuses on His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus' death, resurrection, and eventual return as universal ruler solves the problem of Adam's failure. Christ, as Paul notes, is the second Adam. Revelation 21 and 22 provide the *resolution*. The problem of sin is solved in Jesus Christ, and the creation is returned to its initial peaceful state—in fact, its final state is even better than the initial one. In the new heavens and the new earth, sin is not possible.

⁴⁰ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), 66.

* The fact that God structured the Bible in the form of a story doesn't mean that the Bible is fictional or inaccurate. Divine inspiration determines that the Bible is completely true, and its stories are perfectly factual (2 Tim 3:16; Titus 1:2).

All stories follow the pattern of God's true story. Isn't that how you tell a story to your friends or family? "I was walking to the store [initial situation], when a car skidded out of control [tension]. I leaped out of its path [solution], and escaped without a scratch [resolution]."

Since both you and God tell stories that way, it's no surprise that the authors of biblical narrative tell them that way. Consider the story of Daniel and the lions' den. Initial situation: Because of his extraordinary abilities and integrity, Daniel is appointed as one of three commissioners over the whole Persian Empire. Problem: Jealous enemies plot against Daniel, arranging his unjust execution. Solution: God intervenes to protect Daniel from persecution by miraculously subduing the lions. Resolution: Eventually the wicked persecutors themselves become a meal for the great cats, and Darius circulates a decree declaring Daniel's God to be the living, eternal God. The story fades to black with these words: "Daniel enjoyed success in the reign of Darius and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian" (Dan 6:28).

STUDYING THE STORY

Since the goal of preaching narrative is to retell God's story, you must study the story meticulously, carefully outlining the events that make up the plot or story line. To outline the story's problem-solution plot, you need to look for the four key components of biblical narrative: the *setting*, *events*, *characters*, and *dialogues* of the story. For example, if you were working on the book of Ruth and began by outlining the first chapter, you would find that the first verse of Ruth 1 records the *setting*: the time is the era of the judges; the location is Bethlehem and Moab. The *events* of Ruth 1 are obviously important: the famine in Israel, Elimelech's flight to Moab with his family, the death of Elimelech and his sons, and Naomi's return to Bethlehem.

Three of the story's key *characters* are also introduced in Ruth 1: God, Naomi, and Ruth. The fourth, Boaz, enters the story later. As in all biblical narratives,⁴¹ *dialogue* is also important to Ruth 1: Naomi's declaration that Orpah and Ruth should not accompany her to Bethlehem, Ruth's refusal to be left behind, and Ruth's impassioned declaration of her allegiance to the God of

⁴¹ Ibid., 71-72.

Israel. By studying the setting, events, characters, and dialogues of Ruth 1, you are preparing to retell God's story accurately. They are the key components of the story line. Let me add a few more thoughts about settings, characters, and dialogues.

THE SETTING

Getting a firm grasp on the historical background and the geographic setting of a Bible story is critical. In fact, insight into a story's setting is one of the things that distinguishes good preachers of narrative from poor ones. Is it important that Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac and the provision of God's substitute lamb took place on Mt. Moriah, the very mountain on which Solomon would build the Temple (Gen 22:2; 2 Chr 3:1)? The setting is critical to the theological significance of the story. Is it mere coincidence that the sermon in which Jesus spoke about the relationship between His teaching and the Mosaic law was delivered from a mountain (Matt 5:1)? What the Father did at Sinai, Jesus did in Matthew 5-7. The setting of the Sermon on the Mount is an Everest-like commentary on the authority of Jesus.

CHARACTERS

Biblical narratives rarely give detailed descriptions of their human characters.⁴² What did Abraham, Moses, Peter, or Paul look like? We don't know. However, on occasion a biblical author does provide important details about a character's appearance or reputation. When he does so, take special note. For example, the summary of Job's character in Job 1:1 (blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil) is exceedingly important. It establishes from the start that Job does not suffer because of his wickedness; he suffers in spite of his extraordinary righteousness. In the same way, the gospel writers make a point of saying that John the Baptist carried out his ministry clothed in a outfit reminiscent of Elijah the prophet (Matt 3:4; 2 Kgs 1:8). Similar clothes suggest a similar ministry. Such details can be overplayed. However, since Bible

⁴² Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories: The Bible Student's Guide to Interpreting the Old Testament Narratives* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1990, 1993), 136-7.

stories usually don't provide much description of their characters, when they do, it's probably important.

That said, it is also true that the human characters of a Bible story are a flea on a lion's back when compared to the story's preeminent character. God is always the most important character in a Bible story—even in the book of Esther where His name is not mentioned. To retell a Bible story accurately, you must always keep God on center stage. The story is about Him; the human characters are important only as they obey or disobey Him, love or hate Him, trust or ignore Him. They are fleas; He is the lion.

DIALOGUE

In biblical narrative, authors often tell their story and its theology by means of the words or dialogues of their characters.⁴³ For example, the author of Ruth could have stated in his own words that Ruth converted from worshiping the gods of Moab to serving Yahweh, the God of Israel. However, it was far more compelling to quote Ruth's own words: "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (Ruth 1:16).

The importance of dialogue is also highlighted in the story of David and Goliath. Without the dialogues between David, Saul, and Goliath, 1 Samuel 17 would be only an entertaining account of David's improbable victory over the Philistine giant. With the dialogues, it is a theological treatise on God's power.

Saul: "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him" (17:33).

David: "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (17:37).

Goliath: "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field" (17:44).

⁴³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Narrative," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. by D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 77.

David: "You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (17:45).

While studying the story line of a biblical narrative, you need to give special attention to the words of the characters. Often their speeches or conversations reveal the theological point of the story.

A thorough study of the events, setting, characters, and dialogues of a biblical narrative prepares you to preach God's story in an accurate, interesting, insightful, and compelling manner. Retell the story, commenting and explaining wherever you believe your congregation will need help to understand the historical background or theological significance of something in the story. And tell the story well! When you preach the story of Elijah and Ahab in 1 Kings 17-18, your congregation should taste the dust of Israel's drought. They should feel the heat of the flames that vaporize Elijah's sacrifice and altar. Retell the story of David and Goliath so graphically that when David flings his stone at Goliath's ugly forehead, your listeners dive for cover. Preach the stories of the Bible without exaggeration, but preach them in such a way that your congregation tastes, touches, smells, hears, sees, and experiences the story happening.

FINDING THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE

As important as retelling the story is, there's more to preaching biblical narrative than just that. The authors of the Bible didn't record history just to tell a good story. They recorded history to teach theology.⁴⁴ For example, the apostle John didn't write his gospel merely to provide a catalogue of facts about Jesus of Nazareth. He wrote to convince his readers that Jesus of Nazareth is both Messiah and God: "These [miracles] have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). John's history was aimed at a theological target. That's always true of biblical narrative. Therefore, besides studying to retell the story, to preach narrative well you must also uncover the

⁴⁴ Mathews, "Preaching," 25.

key theological lesson or lessons that the author wanted to communicate when he told that story. Let me give you six tips that will help you discover a biblical historian's theological purpose.

DIRECT STATEMENTS

1) *See if the author directly states the theological lesson he is trying to teach.* We already saw an example of this in John 20:31. To make sure that you don't miss his point, John tells you exactly why he wrote his gospel. All the words, deeds, and miracles of Jesus recorded in John's gospel were included to compel you to believe Jesus is Messiah and God. Naturally then, when you preach from John's gospel, you must let John's purpose shape your purpose.

EDITORIAL COMMENTS

2) *Note editorial comments that the author inserted into the story in order to highlight his theological lesson.* The book of Acts illustrates this principle. Its opening chapters are a series of snapshots of the early church, including the events of the day of Pentecost, the healing of the lame man, Peter's subsequent sermon, the arrest of Peter and John, the selling of property to meet needs, the conflict over widows, the stoning of Stephen, and so on. That's quite a jumble of historical events. How did Luke glue them all together? With comments in which he, the historian, tells you how each story contributes to the overall theme of the book. See if you can discover something about Luke's theological purpose from this sampling of his editorial summaries:

- [They] began to speak the word of God with great boldness. (4:31)
- The apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. (4:33)
- Every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (5:42)
- And the word of God kept on spreading. (6:7)
- Those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. (8:4)
- Those who were scattered ... made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word. (11:19)
- The word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. (12:24)

- [Paul was] preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. (28:30-31)
- The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (2:47)
- Many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of men came to be about five thousand. (4:4)
- All the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number. (5:14)
- Now at this time while the disciples were increasing... (6:1)
- The number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem. (6:7)
- So the church ... continued to increase. (9:31)
- And many believed in the Lord. (9:42)
- The hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. (11:19-21)

These editorial comments or summaries suggest that Luke wrote the book of Acts to show that the early church was faithful to obey Christ's commission to preach the gospel and that God was faithful to bless their efforts with many conversions. Luke's theological message? Whatever internal problems or external pressures threatened its progress, the church preached and the church grew. To sum it up in terms of Matthew 16:18, Christ built His church.

Besides inserting their own comments, biblical historians sometimes use the words of one of the characters to sum up the theological lesson of the story. For example, in Daniel 4, when King Nebuchadnezzar returns to his senses after grazing in the palace gardens, he declares of Yahweh: "He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.... He is able to humble those who walk in pride" (Dan 4:35, 37). Daniel didn't need to supplement Nebuchadnezzar's speech with a closing editorial comment of his own. Nebuchadnezzar's words summarized the theological lesson perfectly.

First Kings provides another example of an author revealing the theological lesson of a story by means of a character's own words. In 1 Kings 17:1, an unknown man named Elijah suddenly appears in the court of Israel and tells King Ahab that it will not rain until he, Elijah, says it will. Then Elijah (who is as much a mystery to the reader at this point as he is to King Ahab) goes into hiding, and eventually ends up staying with the widow of Zarephath. After Elijah raises her son from the dead, the widow bursts out, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is true" (1 Kgs 17:24). By itself, the story of the lad's resurrection

is inconsequential to 1 Kings, but his mother's exclamation reveals the author's purpose for including it. The widow's words express the view of Elijah that the historian wants you to adopt as well. Once the widow has spoken, Elijah is no longer a mystery: he is God's man, a prophet, a man of legitimate divine authority. Biblical authors often reveal the theological lesson of their stories with such summaries, sometimes using their own words, sometimes using a quote from one of the story's characters.

STRUCTURE

3) *Note any literary or structural devices the author used when putting his story together.*

Biblical authors often structure their historical accounts to highlight the theological lesson of their stories.⁴⁵ For example, sometimes they *cluster* groups of stories together to make one point—the miracle accounts of the gospels are a clear example of this. Biblical historians also use *chiasmus*, an A-B-C, C-B-A structure. For example, when you study Genesis 7-8, you discover that Moses purposely structured his story to emphasize God's complete sovereignty over the number of days comprising each stage of the flood: 7, 40, 150, 150, 40, and 7 days. Moses' structure highlights a key theological lesson of the flood: what appears to men to be an out of control worldwide disaster is to God a tightly governed event run on an exact time schedule. David summarizes that lesson in Psalm 29:10, "The Lord sat as King at the flood; yes, the Lord sits as King forever." The tight chiasmic structure of the flood story highlights God's kingship over the whole event.

Another structure biblical historians sometimes use is called an *inclusion*. An inclusion refers to the practice of marking off a section of Scripture by beginning and ending it with a similar phrase or sentence. Matthew provides a good example of this. Notice how Matthew 4:23 and 9:35 mirror each other.

Jesus was going about in all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. (Matt 4:23)

⁴⁵ Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 213-219.

Jesus was going about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. (Matt 9:35)

Matthew's repetition draws attention to the content found between the pillar and post of 4:23 and 9:35. Not surprisingly, a closer look at that section reveals that it is composed of the Sermon on the Mount (an example of Jesus' teaching and evangelism) and a blizzard of healings (including afflictions such as leprosy, fever, paralysis, demon possession, and even death). By employing an inclusion in 4:23 and 9:35, Matthew begs his reader to pay attention to Jesus' teaching and healing ministry, two of Matthew's proofs that Jesus is the Messiah.

REPEATED WORDS OR THEMES

4) *Look for repeated words or themes that suggest the theological lesson of the story.*⁴⁶

We've already seen a clear example of this in Acts where Luke repeatedly refers to the preaching and numerical growth of the early church. If Luke repeats those themes a dozen times, they might just be his point. In Jonah 4, the word *compassion* is used three times. In 4:2, Jonah said that his flight in chapter one was motivated by his knowledge that God might pour out compassion on the Assyrians, rather than judgment. In 4:10-11, Jonah's compassion on the withered plant is contrasted with God's compassion on the sinners of Nineveh. The repetition of the word *compassion* provides a clue to the book's overall theological message.

At first glance, one might mistakenly think that the opening chapters of Nehemiah are about a gifted human leader whose can-do attitude results in the completion of Jerusalem's wall in an astoundingly short fifty-two days. However, that conclusion ignores the oft-repeated theme of God's help: "And the king granted them to me because the good hand of My God was on me" (2:8); "I told them how the hand of God had been favorable to me" (2:18); "They recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God" (6:16; see also 2:20; 4:20; and

⁴⁶ Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching*, 73.

Nehemiah's prayers in 1:11; 2:4; 4:4, 9; 6:9, 14). Biblical authors often use repeated words and themes as road signs, pointing you to the theological lesson of their historical account.

RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

5) *Note rhetorical questions that point to the theological lesson intended by the author.*⁴⁷

A rhetorical question is a question whose answer is so obvious that it requires no answer. A clear example of this is found in the final verse of the book of Jonah. To close the book, God asks Jonah: "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh...?" (Jonah 4:11). The question needs no answer. It is perfectly appropriate for a God who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abundant in lovingkindness to extend mercy to the undeserving Ninevites. God's rhetorical question makes it clear that Jonah's account is not about a naughty prophet and a hungry whale. Actually, it's a powerful theological lesson about God's compassion on undeserving sinners.

CHOICE OF MATERIAL

6) *To find the theological lesson, note what information the author included and excluded.* Why did the writers of the gospels include so little information about Jesus' childhood and youth? Why didn't they tell us what Jesus looked like? Why do all four gospels dedicate so much space to Jesus' miracles, the passion week, and especially His death and resurrection?

Information regarding Jesus' childhood and the color of His eyes appeals only to our curiosity. It does nothing to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. The fact that the gospel writers ignore trivial things such as Jesus' physical appearance and choose, instead, to load their accounts with story after story of Jesus' miracles reveals their agenda: to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is God's appointed Messiah. In the same way, the length and color of Jesus' hair is completely inconsequential to the Christian message. Jesus' death and resurrection, however, are not. The

⁴⁷ Kaiser, *Toward An Exegetical Theology*, 72.

information the gospel writers included and excluded in their accounts points to the theological mission of the gospels.

To preach for God you must study for God. In narrative sections, that means two things. First, you must carefully study the story—its setting, events, characters, and dialogues—so that you can retell the story God told. It also means that, like a good detective, you must track down the clues that point to the author's theological lesson. In the Bible, stories aren't just stories. They are true stories that teach truth about God, God's Son, and God's plan of salvation.

FIVE MORE TIPS FOR TEACHING NARRATIVE

It is rare to hear a good sermon on biblical narrative. In hopes of correcting that problem, let me share five more tips that will help you preach God's stories with excellence.

TEACH A COMPLETE STORY

How much of a historical account should you preach? It's always best to preach a complete plot, a complete problem-solution story line. For example, it would be natural to preach the whole book of Jonah in one sermon; it's a complete story. However, that doesn't mean you always have to preach a full book of the Bible when preaching narrative. You can also preach a small story that is part of a bigger story. For example, while it is possible to preach the whole book of Acts in one sermon, more typically you will preach the many smaller stories of Acts one at a time. It's perfectly acceptable to do so, because each small story in Acts has its own problem-solution story line or plot.

Besides finding a complete problem-solution story line, another way to find a small story within a big story is to look for significant changes in the time or the place of the big story.⁴⁸ For example, in John 3, Jesus is preaching in Judea. In John 4, He leaves Judea behind and begins to travel through Samaria on His way to Galilee. The change of location suggests that John 3 and

⁴⁸ Ibid., 66.

John 4 are distinct stories within the big story of John's gospel. John 5, in turn, begins by introducing a change in both time and place: "*After these things* there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus *went up to Jerusalem*" (5:1, emphasis added). Biblical authors often mark a transition from one story to another with a change of geographic location and with phrases such as *after these things, and it came about, after many days, now, or when Jesus finished these words*. Noting such transitions will help you decide how much narrative to preach in one sermon.

CONNECT TO CHRIST IN LEGITIMATE WAYS

Never forget that Jesus Christ is God's ultimate solution to the problems created by Adam's sin. Therefore, even when teaching Old Testament narrative, you should helicopter up on occasion and show your congregation how the story fits into the bigger scheme of things, how Christ is the ultimate solution to every human catastrophe.⁴⁹

Unfortunately, some preachers make a practice of connecting to Christ by asserting that nearly every person, event, or thing in an Old Testament story represents Christ. For example, such a preacher might claim that the bread that strengthened David and his men when they were fleeing from Saul in 1 Samuel 21 represents Christ, the bread of life, who is our spiritual strength. If you want to teach on the bread of life, teach from John 6, not 1 Samuel 21. Spiritualizing the details of an Old Testament narrative in a contrived effort to connect to Christ is neither necessary nor profitable. Too often the supposed connection is only the product of the preacher's imagination and has nothing to do with the intent of the story's divine or human author. There are many God-intended types of Christ in the Old Testament—the key is the phrase *God-intended*. Therefore, resist the temptation to create unproven and unprovable "spiritual" meanings for the five stones in David's bag or for every rug, bowl, and pole in the Tabernacle.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1994, 2005), 15.

⁵⁰ Eugene H. Merrill, "History," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. by D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 106.

Two principles can guide you in your efforts to connect to Christ from Old Testament narrative. First, when identifying types, restrain yourself by limiting yourself primarily, if not exclusively, to the types of Christ that the New Testament identifies as God-intended types. Second, make legitimate connections to Christ from the *main point* of an Old Testament story, not from its incidental details. In other words, focus on the fact that Christ is the true solution to sin, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises, the ultimate Davidic king, and so on. Referring to those truths will bring Christ into your sermon in legitimate ways and will keep your imagination in check.

NARRATIVE AND APPLICATION

When applying narrative, many preachers never look past the conduct of the story's human characters: David was good here; be like David. Saul was bad there; don't be like Saul.⁵¹ First Corinthians 10:6, Romans 15:4, and James 5:10-11 point out that it is perfectly appropriate to draw lessons from the behavior of Bible characters. However, never forget that God is the main character of biblical narrative. The key lessons of a Bible story are always about God, not men.⁵²

Because the key lessons of the Bible's narratives are about God, they are always applicable. God doesn't change; therefore, what Jacob, Jehoshaphat, Ezra, the woman at the well, and Ananias and Sapphira learned about God in their stories is still true today. What's more, you face the same kinds of temptations, trials, and terrors that Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Job, and Paul faced. Biblical narratives speak of the same God, the same world, and the same kind of people that exist today; therefore, their lessons have enduring application.⁵³

When you draw ethical principles—Do this; don't do that—from narrative, make sure that a teaching section of Scripture clearly says that the behavior you have targeted is good or evil, worthy of imitation or not. Why? The actions of Bible heroes are not always included because

⁵¹ David C. Deuel, "Expository Preaching from Old Testament Narrative," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, John MacArthur, Jr. and The Master's Seminary Faculty (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1992), 283.

⁵² Mathews, "Preaching," 34-5.

⁵³ Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 324.

they are noble.⁵⁴ For example, David had multiple wives, committed adultery, and murdered to cover his sin. There are many imitable things about David, but those aren't some of them. Why not? The teaching sections of Scripture tell you that they are God-hated behavior.

In the same way, the actions of Bible characters are often one-time, non-reproducible actions. Should everyone speak with God face to face as Moses did? Should we do *everything* Jesus did? Have you tried to walk on water recently? In other words, just because a Bible character did it doesn't necessarily mean you should too. First make sure from a teaching section of Scripture that God expects you to do it, and then imitate your hero.

NARRATIVE AND DOCTRINE

Exercise caution when formulating doctrine from biblical narrative.⁵⁵ Narrative is inspired and authoritative; however, Bible stories don't always say everything they could say about a theological issue. Don't use their lack of detail to give birth to a dangerous theology. Too often narrative is twisted to "prove" something it was never intended to teach; therefore, when developing a doctrine, start with the teaching sections of Scripture that directly address that subject, then look to find that doctrine illustrated in narrative.

PREACH IT WELL!

Bible stories are not fiction. Their characters are real people to whom these things really happened, and you should preach biblical narrative with that in mind. If you had been there, you could have wiped the tears from Job's cheeks as he tore his robe in anguish over the death of his children. Your people should feel that anguish when you preach Job 1-2. Don't let your imagination run wild by manufacturing details or events the text doesn't mention, but at the same time, retell the story in such a way as to make it real. And as you retell the story, teach the

⁵⁴ Deuel, "Expository Preaching," 284.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 284.

theological lesson intended by the author: that's preaching narrative the way God would preach it.

EXERCISES

To sharpen your ability to study narrative, read the passages below, and note how they exemplify the principles you have learned in this chapter.

Repeated words or themes:

Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 21-23, 31

Job 1:1, 8; 2:3

Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25

Inclusion:

1 Samuel 15:34; 16:13

Editorial summaries in the author's words:

2 Kings 17:7-23

Judges 13:1; 14:4

Summaries in the character's own words:

Genesis 45:5-7; 50:20

John 4:42

CHAPTER TEN

DIAGRAMMING AND OUTLINING NARRATIVE

I believe in block diagramming, but should you diagram all fifty-eight verses of 1 Samuel 17 when preparing to preach the story of David and Goliath? It's unlikely that a rigorous diagramming of the verses about Goliath's helmet, armor, and spear will reveal anything more than a careful reading of the text. Should you, then, abandon block diagramming entirely when it comes to lengthy narratives? No. While diagramming every verse in a long narrative might not be necessary, you should faithfully carry out the following two steps when preparing to preach a lengthy biblical narrative.

OUTLINE THE STORY

1) *Outline the story in detail.* As the last chapter taught you to do, make note of the setting, events, characters, dialogues, editorial comments, rhetorical questions, and so on, that make up the story.⁵⁶ This thorough outline of the story is, in a sense, your diagram. It shows how the different parts of the text are working together to advance the story. Below is an example of a simple outline of the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.

⁵⁶ Kaiser, "Narrative," 80.

1-3	the arena of God's power	(the geographic setting)
4-11	the adversary of God's power	(Goliath)
12-22	the implement of God's power	(David)
23-30	the impudence of God's power	(David's fearless attitude)
31-39	the desperation of ignoring God's power	(Saul's willingness to use David)
40-47	the discussion of God's power	(David and Goliath's dialogue)
48-50	the demonstration of God's power	(David's unexpected victory or, more accurately, God's utterly predictable victory)

This outline doesn't depict the grammar of the text—such a diagram would be far too bulky to be of any real use. Nonetheless, this outline identifies the parts of the story in exactly the same way a block diagram identifies the parts of a sentence.

In lengthy narrative sections a detailed outline is your block diagram. However, hidden in most biblical stories, is a golden nugget, a small, theologically important section that you should diagram. Therefore, I suggest a second step.

DIAGRAM THE KEY PORTION

2) *Diagram the key theological portion or portions of the story.* In most narratives, there is a dialogue or editorial summary that acts as a billboard advertising the author's message. That section is the egg you must crack in order to access the nutritious, yellow yolk of the story's theology. Therefore, when studying narrative, I make it my practice to diagram that critical portion of the story. For example, when I preached 1 Samuel 17, I first studied the story and created an outline (given in simplified form above). I took special note of the author's editorial comment on David's victory in 17:50, "there was no sword in David's hand." I also diagrammed the vital theological statements made by David in 17:34-37 and 17:45-47. David's words in those verses drive home the theological lesson of the story. Below is a diagram of the key portions of 17:45-47. See if you can find the theme of Yahweh's unique power in David's words.

You come

to me

with a sword,

a spear,

and

a javelin,

but

I come

to you

in the name

of the Lord of hosts,

the God of the armies of Israel,

whom you have taunted.

The Lord will deliver you up

this day

into my hands...

that *[purpose]*

all the earth may know there is a God in Israel

and

that *[purpose]*

all this assembly may know that the Lord does not deliver

by sword or by spear

for *[causa]*

the battle is the Lord's

and

He will give you
into our hands

The clauses that develop *The Lord will deliver* reveal the theological lesson of the story of David and Goliath. It's not a feel-good story about a little guy beating a big guy. It's not a story about David's unexpected victory over a giant. It's a story about God's utterly predictable victory over an insignificant, three-meter-tall human. David's words highlight the lesson: God's power is absurdly greater than Goliath's power; God's power cannot be thwarted by swords or spears even if they are wielded by a man as tall as a giraffe. In fact, in light of David's statements, we should probably change our name for the story from David and Goliath to *God* and Goliath.*

Many preachers have mis-taught the story of God and Goliath because they didn't pay enough attention to the author's theological lesson as revealed in David's dialogues with Saul and Goliath. But if you put David's words in the vice of a block diagram, every last drop of theology is squeezed out, and you find the author's theological message.

PLURAL NOUN OUTLINES

Outlines that sum up a biblical story usually focus on the setting, events, characters, and dialogues of the story. For example, the following outline identifies four key events in the life of the church of Antioch (Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3).

1) Their evangelism

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch... (11:20-22)

*The fact that no one can stand against David, God's anointed, reminds us that no one will be able to stand against David's greatest son, the ultimate God-appointed king, Jesus Christ. If God's power worked through David, how much more so through Christ? That's a legitimate connection to Christ, made from the story's main point.

2) Their training

And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. (11:25-26)

3) Their serving

Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders. (11:27-30)

4) Their missions

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. (13:1-3)

This outline easily lends itself to a plural noun summary: "In this account, we find *four activities* of the church of Antioch that we want to imitate in order to make our church a strong, New Testament church." That clear, simple outline will allow you to preach a clear, effective sermon.

If you take the time to read Nehemiah 4-6, you will find that those chapters can be summed up with this outline:

4:1-6	insults
4:7-23	invasion
5:1-19	internal disruption
6:1-14	intrigues
6:17-19	infiltration

We can put the five oranges of Nehemiah 4-6 in one bag: "In Nehemiah 4-6, we find *five forms of opposition* that God helped Nehemiah overcome when Nehemiah was rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem." The theological point of the narrative is summed up in 6:15-16, when Nehemiah notes that the people completed the wall in fifty-two days, and then adds, "When all our enemies heard of it ... they lost their confidence; for they recognized that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God."

TEXTUAL MARKER OUTLINES

Some biblical narratives stubbornly resist being squashed into a plural noun summary. In that case, use an outline that retells the story and don't worry about a plural noun at all. Why cripple a great story with a plural noun that doesn't really work? Stories have their own natural progression; let that work for you.⁵⁷ An outline that retells the story will use key words and phrases called *textual markers* to summarize the story's events, characters, dialogues, and so on.

The outline of 1 Samuel 17 given earlier illustrates this approach. In that outline the textual makers were the *arena, adversary, implement, impudence, desperation, discussion, and demonstration* of God's power. Those markers retell the story of God and Goliath. They tell your congregation what to look for as the sermon moves from one part of the story to the next. Moreover, adding the phrase *of God's power* to each word assures that the listeners never lose sight of the theological lesson.

The following outline of Matthew 26:57-68 retells the story of Jesus' trial before the Jewish leaders on the night of His arrest. It focuses on the characters and key events of the trial. *The charge* and *the plea* highlight the theological lesson of the story: Jesus' self-testimony that He is the Christ, the Son of God.

⁵⁷ Mathews, "Preaching," 42.

57	the defendant	(Jesus)
58	the spectator	(Peter)
59	the jury	(the Council)
59-62	the witnesses	(the religious leaders' false witnesses)
63	the charge	(Jesus' claim to be the Christ, the Son of God)
64	the guilty plea	(Jesus' confirmation of the charge)
65-68	the sentence	(execution)

Outlining a story with textual markers is an effective way to retell God's story. The weakness of textual markers is that they may not sum up the theology of the story as well as a plural noun summary.⁵⁸ Therefore, if you use textual markers, make sure that you highlight the author's theological lesson at appropriate points during the sermon. Ultimately, whether you use a plural noun summary or textual markers, retell God's story and teach the theological lesson intended by the author: that's preaching narrative the way God would preach it.

⁵⁸ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 153.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STUDYING PROVERBS

When my friend, Scott, started to date the girl he would eventually marry, her grandfather took a keen interest in Scott's spiritual progress, even though he lived two thousand kilometers away. During one of his visits, in the middle of a conversation about the importance of personal Bible study, the wise old man suddenly leaned across the table and plucked Scott's Bible out of his hands and held it up to the light, inspecting it minutely. It was a fairly new Bible with gold-edged pages. When his survey was finished, the old man returned the Bible and pointed out what his inspection had revealed. The shiny gold veneer was nearly worn off the pages that comprised the last quarter of my friend's Bible. Those New Testament pages were well-thumbed—worn, bent, and ruffled from constant access. However, the pages making up the initial three-fourths of my friend's Bible still retained their gleaming, sparkly edges. Turning to the middle of that relatively untouched section, the old man indicated Proverbs and Psalms specifically and said, "On my next visit, young man, I want to find these pages as well-worn as your New Testament pages."

I wish that more grandfathers gave advice like that! In fact, I wish more preachers took that advice, not just for their personal Bible reading, but for their preaching. No book of the Bible is more life-changing than Proverbs, and no book of the Bible trumpets a high view of God more loudly than Psalms, yet very few preachers strive to master them. Master them? Many never preach from them at all! For their congregations, the wisdom of Proverbs and the worship of Psalms are two caged lions. Lithe, powerful, and matchless in battle, Wisdom and Worship peer through the bars of their cage with solemn, far-seeing eyes, waiting anxiously to be released, but they remain locked up, held captive in pages the preacher never opens in the pulpit. All that Wisdom and Worship can do is pace, flexing their muscles in frustration, hoping that someday the preacher will preach from Proverbs and Psalms so that they can set their claws and fangs to his

flock's foolishness and low views of God. But the preacher never opens the cage, and their power is wasted.

Perhaps the preacher is restrained by fear. Proverbs and Psalms are rugged terrain for a preacher who spends his life hiking the familiar hills and well-tilled valleys of the New Testament. Such fear is unfortunate: spectacular views await the preacher courageous enough to brave the narrow, but straight paths of Proverbs and the alpine crests and dark canyons of the Psalms. If you have been daunted by the unfamiliarity of Proverbs and Psalms or have been preoccupied with the pages of your New Testament (an excellent preoccupation as far as it goes!), my goal in this chapter and the next is to goad you out the door and onto some new paths. Let the lions of Proverbs and Psalms loose! How will your congregation be wise without Proverbs? How will they be worshipful without the Psalms? Preach from Proverbs and Psalms, and watch your congregation's sin and idolatry scatter like a herd of terrified impala before a lion's charge.

Proverbs is one of my passions as a preacher. This chapter will outline principles for studying it; the next chapter will focus on the Psalms.

PROVERBS IS LIFE

More than any other book of the Bible, Proverbs teaches you how to become like Christ in daily life—life on Tuesday at six in the morning when it's time to get out of bed, on Thursday at three in the afternoon when your children are misbehaving, and on Friday night at eleven when the gang wants to go prowling for trouble. Proverbs teaches wisdom for Christ-like living primarily by teaching you how to handle relationships, both relationships with God (the fear of the Lord) and relationships with people. Is it wise to focus on relationships as Proverbs does? Yes. Relationships are what make life good or bad—not money, the house you live in, nor the clothes you wear, but your relationships with God, your spouse, your children, your extended family, and all the people you rub shoulders with every day. Solomon himself underscores the importance of relationships when he says, "Better is a dish of vegetables where love is than a fattened ox served with hatred" (15:17). Lettuce and love are better than steak and strife.

DIVORCE LAWYER VS. MARRIAGE COUNSELOR

I like to illustrate the importance of Proverbs by contrasting Proverbs with the law of Moses. The law was like a divorce lawyer: it outlined the legal procedures you had to follow *after* your relationship with a person had disintegrated. Proverbs, on the other hand, is like a marriage counselor: it teaches you how to fix your relationships *before* they unravel.

Let's suppose that you were an Old Testament Israelite, and you were digging a cistern for storing rain water, but you neglected to fence in or cover over the gaping hole. Tragically, while nosing around for food, your neighbor's donkey fell in the hole and was killed. If that happened, the law of Moses told you exactly what to do, legally speaking. Exodus 21:33-34 said that you had to pay your neighbor a fair compensation for his donkey, and that it was your responsibility to dispose of the creature's body.

In other words, Moses dealt primarily with relationships that were already broken. He gave much less attention to explaining how to keep them from breaking in the first place. That was Proverbs' job. Moses told you how to handle the legal consequences of the cistern crisis, but he didn't teach you what to do when your angry neighbor stormed up to your front door, yelling furiously about his dead donkey. This, however, is what Proverbs was written for. When the angry neighbor pounds on your door, Solomon rolls up his sleeves, rubs his hands together in anticipation, and starts dishing out wisdom: "A fool always loses his temper" (29:11); "Do not answer a fool according to his folly" (26:4); "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (15:1); "Abandon the quarrel before it breaks out" (17:14); "Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, but any fool will quarrel" (20:3).

Moses told you what the penalty would be if you were too lazy to cover your unfinished cistern, but Solomon teaches you the value of diligence and how ant-like labor replaces the sluggard's lack of self-discipline and disdain for sweat (6:6-11; 10:4). Sexual purity, money, debt, marriage roles, disciplining children, decision-making, men-fearing, anger, lying stubbornness, pride—Proverbs is packed with practical wisdom for Christ-honoring relationships. You need to preach Proverbs.

SIX PRINCIPLES FOR STUDYING PROVERBS

Proverbs are wisdom in pill form—effective medicine easily swallowed. In fact, sometimes when I'm preaching from the book of Proverbs, I feel slightly guilty. Its insights are so clear, so simple, so immediately applicable that they hardly need a sermon at all. You could get in the pulpit, read the words, "Any fool will quarrel," and close in prayer. What more is needed? Actually, more is needed. Illustrations, explanations, cross references, and the place of Christ are all needed, but the fact remains, it is a delight to preach from this book because proverbs are a sermon in one sentence.

But as our motto reminds us, to preach for God, you must first study for God. Are there any special principles to consider when preparing a sermon from the book of Proverbs? Let me give you six.

1) PAY ATTENTION TO PARALLELISM

English poetry is usually built around *parallel sounds* called *rhyme*: *I'm a poet, don't you know it*. Hebrew poetry occasionally employs parallel sounds, but usually chooses to focus on *parallel themes* and *structures*.⁵⁹ Rather than tie two lines of poetry together by making them end with a similar sound, Hebrew poets link lines of poetry together by using similar words and ideas, a practice called *parallelism*. There are four common types of parallelism found in Proverbs, and understanding them is critical to studying the book.⁶⁰

ALMOST EQUALS

1. Synonymous parallelism. This is when the second line of a proverb repeats the instruction or insight of the first line with only a slight change in terminology. C. S. Lewis overstates

⁵⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 2 vols., The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 1:41.

⁶⁰ These four categories are taken from C. Hassel Bullock, "The Book of Proverbs," in *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1995), 31-33.

the case when he calls synonymous parallelism "saying the same thing twice in different words,"⁶¹ but he isn't too far off the mark. It might be more accurate to say that the two lines are more than equal, but less than different. Therefore, by adding the words *and what's more* you capture the relationship between the two lines quite effectively. Consider Proverbs 16:18 as an example, "Pride goes before destruction, [*and what's more*] a haughty spirit before stumbling." Notice how the parallels jump off the page if you break down Proverbs 16:18 with a modified block diagram.

Pride	goes	before destruction
↕	↕	↕
a haughty spirit	[goes]	before stumbling

More than equal, less than different. The original Hebrew shows no regard for parallel sounds, but it's obvious that Solomon worked hard to include parallel ideas and words in this proverb. Both lines have the same theme: pride and its ghastly consequences. Furthermore, the words Solomon employed (*pride* and *haughty spirit*, *destruction* and *stumbling*) make for perfect balance—like two children who weigh exactly the same amount sitting on opposite ends of a teeter-totter. The repetition, balance, and proportion are intentional: they make the proverb easy to memorize, a benefit Solomon clearly intended. Note two more examples of synonymous parallelism.

Let	another	praise you,	and not your own mouth
	↕		↕
	a stranger		and not your own lips. (27:2)

He who is slow to anger	is better than	the mighty
↕		↕
and he who rules his spirit,	than	he who captures a city. (16:32)

⁶¹ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, reprinted in *The Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1987), 134.

OPPOSITES

2. *Antithetical parallelism*. The word *antithetical* refers to opposites. Therefore, in antithetical proverbs the second line is somehow the opposite of the first line. In the case of Proverbs 13:20, the opposites are the consequences for a man whose friends are wise and the consequences for a man whose friends are fools.

He who walks with wise men will be wise
but
the companion of fools will suffer harm (13:20)

Notice that while the results of having wise or foolish friends are completely opposite, the lesson of both lines is actually the same: the importance of choosing your friends wisely. This is typical of antithetical parallelism. It appears that *two* subjects are under consideration; however, actually only *one* lesson is being taught, positively in one line, negatively in the other. Consider another example (I've juggled the word order so that you can see the parallels more clearly):

He who spares his rod hates his son
but
he who disciplines him diligently loves him (13:24)

Do you see the opposites? Hate and love are two motivations for disciplining or not disciplining unruly children. The one unifying lesson, however, is the importance of disciplining your children. Notice in the next example how the contrast between debt and reward actually teaches one message, the importance of your attitude towards God's word.

The one who despises the word will be in debt to it
but
the one who fears the commandment will be rewarded (13:13)

As you've noticed, finding antithetical proverbs isn't hard; usually they have the word *but* in the middle of them. When studying them (and there are many in Proverbs), always find the two opposites being contrasted *and* the one lesson they teach.

ADDITION

3. *Synthetic parallelism.* The word *synthesis* means to combine two things; it refers to addition. Therefore, synthetic parallelism is when the second line of a proverb adds a new thought to the first line. Usually the second line expands, amplifies, applies, or illustrates the first line. As with synonymous parallelism, you can add the words *and what's more* between the lines (or *moreover*, *furthermore*, or *beyond that*) to draw out the sense. In 10:18, Solomon adds a condemnation of slander to his rebuke of hatred.

He who conceals hatred has lying lips
and what's more
he who spreads slander is a fool. (10:18)

In the next example, we find that Solomon first rebukes pride, and then amplifies the lesson by adding a thought about pride's deadly consequences:

Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord
furthermore
assuredly he will not go unpunished. (16:5)

A scoffer does not love one who reproves him
and what's more
he will not go to the wise. (15:12)

UNEXPECTED EQUALS

4. *Comparative parallelism.* These proverbs make an unexpected comparison between the human realm and something in nature, usually by using the words *like* or *as*. For example, consider how Proverbs 25:25 compares good news and a cup of cold water:

Like cold water to a weary soul, so is good news from a distant land (25:25)

Like one who takes a dog by the ears is he who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him. (26:17)

Like vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is the lazy one to those who send him. (10:26)

If you're mathematically inclined, you can picture the different kinds of parallelism with mathematical symbols. In synonymous parallelism, the first and second line are nearly equal: it can be represented $A=B$. Antithetical parallelism involves a contrast, so you can represent it $A\neq B$. Synthetic parallelism adds a new thought in the second line; therefore, it is $A+B$. Comparative parallelism identifies a surprising similarity between two things (such as a lazy preacher and drinking a glass of vinegar!); therefore, it can be represented $A=B!$

TWO, FOUR, OR SIX

In some cases, Proverbs breaks the two-line mold that dominates the book, and gives you four- or even six-line proverbs, but as these block diagrams reveal, parallel structure still rules.⁶²

Do not associate

with a man given to anger

or

go

with a hot-tempered man

or [consequences]

you will learn his ways

and

⁶² Bullock, "The Book of Proverbs," 32.

find a snare
for yourself. (22:24-25)

Do not be envious
of evil men
nor
desire to be with them

for [reasons]

their minds devise violence
and
their lips talk of trouble. (24:1-2)

There are many other structures in the book of Proverbs (such as the *better than* proverbs: 17:1; 21:9; 27:5; 28:6, etc.), but the parallel structures explained above are the most common. Don't bore your congregation by loading your sermons with unnecessary references to technical terms like synthetic or synonymous parallelism. Use such terms only if they actually help your congregation better understand the text. However, as a preacher, *you* must be familiar with them. Therefore, to build your skill at identifying different kinds of parallelism, label each of the following verses as synonymous, antithetical, synthetic, or comparative parallelism. The answer key for this exercise is at the end of the chapter.

18:21	17:27	29:17	19:21	24:16	27:17
25:15	17:28	29:25	26:21	29:11	25:28
25:21	28:13	17:17	29:25	25:23	16:28
29:23	21:25	26:14			

While parallelism is a key feature in Proverbs, there are at least five other important principles to keep in mind when studying the book.

2) LOOK FOR GROUPS OF PROVERBS THAT TEACH ONE LESSON

Many proverbs stand alone, a golden nugget of divine wisdom waiting to be plucked from the pages of Scripture. But always keep an eye out for groups of proverbs that address one subject. For example, Proverbs 23:1-28 has as its theme things that a wise man will not covet, including money (vv. 4-5), the delicacies of a manipulator's banquet table (vv. 6-8), and his neighbor's field (vv. 10-12). It is, in essence, a group of proverbs teaching you how to apply the tenth commandment. In a similar fashion, Proverbs 26:17-28 works as a unit to identify attitudes and actions that destroy relationships: trickery excused as a prank, contentious attitudes, a hateful heart, and lying lips.

In some places, Proverbs employs a poem, song, or some other extended literary unit to teach God's wisdom. In such cases, you shouldn't preach just one verse or another from that section; you should preach the whole section verse by verse. Consider the following examples.

1:1-7	The introduction and motto of Proverbs
1:10-19	Warnings against men-pleasing
chaps. 1-9	An extended effort by Solomon to convince his sons to embrace Lady Wisdom rather than the vacuous Lady Folly with her banquet of stale bread and stolen water.
7:1-27	A young fool's path to sexual sin
23:29-35	A poem against drunkenness
27:23-27	A poem exalting the benefits of organization
24:30-34	Lessons from a sluggard's field
31:10-31	The celebration of an excellent wife

3) LOOK FOR THE *PUT OFF, PUT ON* PATTERN OF SPIRITUAL CHANGE

At salvation, sinners are declared righteous by God through the death of Jesus Christ. But how do declared saints become daily saints? How do those declared righteous start to live

righteously? The apostle Paul tells you in Ephesians 4:22-24. Declared saints become daily saints when, by the power of God's Spirit, they work out their salvation by implementing a three-step process of change. They *put off* or stop their old, sinful patterns of thinking and acting; they *renew* their minds by studying the Bible; and they *put on* new, Christ-like ways of thinking and acting.⁶³

What does that have to do with studying Proverbs? A lot. If you look at Ephesians 4-5, you find that Paul follows 4:22-24 with a section that is remarkably Proverbs-like in both style and content. In a series of short, direct, proverbial commands, Paul says that lying must be replaced by truth-telling (4:25), and that stealing must be replaced by hard work and sharing (4:28). Perverse words are blotted out by gracious speech (4:29; 5:3-4); anger is conquered by kindness and a willingness to forgive (4:31-32). Ultimately, foolishness must be replaced by wisdom (5:15-17). Is this Paul or Solomon?

Based on how he follows up 4:22-24, Paul clearly believes that the spade of Proverbs is one of the best tools in the shed for digging up the root of sin. It makes perfect sense: Proverbs lives, eats, and breathes Paul's put off, put on pattern. See if you can identify the *put off* parts and the *put on* parts of the following proverbs.

There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (12:18)

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion. (28:13)

A man's pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor. (29:23)

Over and over again, the book of Proverbs teaches the godly attitudes and actions that replace ungodly ones: healing speech replaces razor-blade words; confession and repentance replace a refusal to admit sin; humility replaces pride. To study and preach the book of Proverbs effectively, you must train your eye to see (and your heart to implement) this put off, put on pattern. What Paul preached in Ephesians, Solomon perfected long ago.

⁶³ Jay Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 218.

4) LOOK FOR THE LAW OF CONSEQUENCES IN ACTION

The law of consequences is summed up by the apostle Paul in these words: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap" (Gal 6:7). If you plant wheat, oats, or sorghum in your field, that's what you'll harvest at the end of the growing season. If you plant weeds and thistles, you'll harvest weeds and thistles. That's the law of consequences applied to farming: what you put in the ground is what comes out of the ground. The same cause-and-effect principle holds true in spiritual matters. For example, Solomon says that if you drive on the road of pride, you'll arrive at a predictable destination, a town called Destruction: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling" (Prov 16:18). As sure as fire burns, so pride leads to catastrophe.

Proverbs makes its living by pointing out the tiresomely predictable (but somehow always overlooked) consequences of decisions. Finances: "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower becomes the lender's slave" (22:7). Friends: "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm" (13:20). Falsehood: "He who tells lies will not escape" (19:5).

CHARACTER → CONDUCT → CONSEQUENCES

In Proverbs, character produces conduct, and conduct produces consequences.⁶⁴ The sluggard is a classic example. The sluggard is disorderly and loves ease, and his self-serving, pleasure-loving character inevitably produces lazy conduct: like a door to its frame, he is attached to his bed with hinges (26:14). He can always give a reason for not working, no matter how ridiculous his excuse ("There's a lion in the square!"). As water runs downhill, so the consequences of his conduct are predictable. His fields are guarded by crumbling walls and are choked with a riot of weeds (24:30-34). Too tied to his bed to walk behind the plow, at harvest

⁶⁴ Waltke, *Proverbs*, 1:73.

time he reaps nothing, and falls into poverty (20:4). Proverbs warns the young and old alike: before you foster a character trait or choose a course of conduct, consider its consequences.

Nowhere is the tight relationship between conduct and consequences more clearly seen than in Proverbs' instructions on sexual purity:

Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk on hot coals, and his feet not be scorched? So is the one who goes in to his neighbor's wife; whoever touches her will not go unpunished. (6:27-29)

Sow adultery; harvest pain. As surely as hot coals pressed against the skin of your tummy will cause agony, so the adulterer will pay a life-long price for his few minutes of pleasure. Proverbs majors on consequences: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."

AN AFRICAN APPLICATION

Embracing Proverbs' instruction on consequences is especially important for preachers who minister in Africa. Many of our congregation members come from a background of witchcraft in which misfortunes are blamed on angry ancestors or on jealous enemies who have paid a witchdoctor to curse them. Proverbs, however, turns attention away from such explanations, and focuses on how character and conduct lead to consequences.*

For example, on a visit to the seminary where he was trained, an African friend of mine found himself listening to the complaints of a student who was failing Bible Survey, a class requiring a significant amount of reading and memorization. The student ended his mournful tale with this analysis, "Somebody must have put a curse on me; that's why I'm failing this class." My friend, being familiar with the book of Proverbs, was reluctant to accept this interpretation of the situation. Asking a few questions, he soon discovered that the student was spending most of his free time at the local mall, rather than studying. The student had been bewitched, but not by a

* Christians in Western congregations also struggle with not taking responsibility for the bad consequences of their sinful character and conduct. However, in their case the culprit is usually the influence of psychology, not witchcraft.

witchdoctor; he had been "bewitched" by his love of ease and entertainment. Proverbs 10:4 would have pointed him to the correct cause of his crisis: "Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich." A love of ease led to the conduct of not studying, which resulted in the consequence of failing Bible Survey. When studying Proverbs, always keep an eye out for the law of consequences: it's everywhere in Proverbs.

5) DISTINGUISH BETWEEN ABSOLUTE AND AXIOMATIC TRUTHS

Below are two Proverbs. One is *always* true; one is *usually* true. Decide which is which.

Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. (10:4)

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (9:10a)

It is absolutely and always true that wisdom begins with fearing the Lord (9:10). In contrast, Solomon's observation in 10:4 isn't absolute. In 10:4, Solomon states something that is *usually* true. He identifies a clearly observable pattern in God's world: normally there is a very close relationship between effort and success. On occasion you might come across a lazy man who is rich or a hard-working man who is poorer than his companions; however, those situations are exceptions. In other words, Proverbs contains two different kinds of God-inspired observations: those that are *always* true and those that are *usually* true. To avoid misinterpreting and misapplying Proverbs, you must learn to distinguish between the two.⁶⁵

Statements in Proverbs that are always true can be called *absolute truths*. For example, Proverbs 16:5 says, "Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord" (16:5a). That's an absolute truth. God has never once in His eternal existence looked on pride with sympathy or favor; pride is always repulsive to Him. Proverbs also says, "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil" (8:13). That's always, always true: the fear of the Lord never, never loves evil. Those two Proverbs teach absolute truths, things that are always true.

⁶⁵ Ted A. Hildebrandt, "Proverbs," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. by D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 246-48.

AXIOMATIC PROVERBS

Other proverbs, however, teach wisdom in a different way. They identify patterns, not absolutes; they make observations about how things usually work in God's world.⁶⁶ In other words, they teach *axiomatic truths*. An axiom is something so undeniable, so widely observed to be true, that it doesn't need to be proven by argument. Proverbs is full of such observations about life in God's world.

For example, consider the verse we have been focusing on, Proverbs 10:4. Do I need to prove the accuracy of Solomon's observation in that verse? Do I need to prove that diligent workers are usually more successful than lazy, negligent ones? It is undeniable that in God's world lazy students usually get poor marks, lazy workers receive poor pay, lazy husbands have poor marriages, and lazy preachers preach poor sermons. We have all observed the pattern: success usually follows effort. However, Solomon's observation in 10:4, while usually true, is not absolutely true.

IS THIS IMPORTANT?

It's important to distinguish between absolute and axiomatic proverbs for two reasons. First, it keeps you from being thrown off stride when you come across a lazy student who gets high marks or a lazy worker who earns a good salary. For example, Job's friends *were* thrown off stride. They were convinced that there could be no exceptions to the pattern that God blesses the righteous with prosperity and gives the toe of His boot to the wicked.⁶⁷ Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar loved proverbs like Proverbs 13:21: "Adversity pursues sinners, but the righteous will be rewarded with prosperity." But while generally true, that proverb wasn't true in Job's case. He was blameless and upright; nonetheless, adversity pursued him like a pack of hyenas after a crippled antelope. Understanding that many proverbs in the book of Proverbs are axiomatic will save you

⁶⁶ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1993), 57.

⁶⁷ Derek Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1985), 62.

from tumbling over exceptions, and it will save you from causing others to stumble because of bad counsel, as was the case with Job and his friends.

Besides keeping you from being confused by exceptions, distinguishing between absolute and axiomatic proverbs also keeps you from turning proverbial observations into divine promises. As Ted Hildebrandt notes, "Equating a proverb with a promise is a frequent and elemental [i.e., basic] mistake when interpreting proverbs."⁶⁸ For example, one of my favorite proverbs teaches that a gentle answer turns away wrath (15:1). Under most circumstances, that's true. But on rare occasions you'll meet a man so dominated by anger that not even calm, quiet, kind words will dampen the fire of his fury. It's not that Proverbs 15:1 has failed. Solomon wasn't giving a promise; he was making a divinely inspired, wise observation about how relationships usually work in God's world. While not an absolute promise, Christ-like gentleness normally does defuse the bomb of anger.

In the same way, Proverbs 22:6 says that a child trained in the way that he should go will continue in that path when he is old. Is that verse an absolute guarantee that every well-raised child will walk in the paths of righteousness when he or she grows to adulthood? Solomon was giving no such guarantee. He was simply identifying a predictable pattern to motivate parents of young children: when you start your children on the path of wisdom, usually they continue to trod that path even as adults.

Whether absolute or axiomatic, God's proverbs should be taught with authority and power. Let Wisdom out of its cage to set tooth and claw to your congregation's foolishness and sin. Preach the absolutely true proverbs as absolutely true: God *a/ways* despises pride; the fear of the Lord is *a/ways* the beginning of wisdom. You should also preach axiomatic proverbs with firmness and conviction—they identify important patterns, patterns that it is foolish and destructive to ignore. Harsh words do stir up anger; gentle answers defuse it; careless, untrustworthy workers inevitably bear the consequences of their laziness. Preach both absolute proverbs and axiomatic proverbs as the life-giving wisdom they are.

⁶⁸ Hildebrandt, "Proverbs," 247.

Below are a number of verses from the book of Proverbs. Look up each passage, and determine whether it is referring to something that is *always* true or something that is *usually* true. Is it teaching an absolute truth or an axiomatic one? The answer key is at the end of the chapter.

6:16-19
21:31

3:3-4
28:23

3:9-10

23:4-5

6) SEARCH FOR ALL OF PROVERBS' WISDOM ON A SUBJECT

As noted under point two, some sections of Proverbs should be taught verse by verse; they are a coherent unit. However, many of your sermons from the book of Proverbs will be topical in nature. The reason is obvious: Proverbs' wisdom on a given subject is often scattered widely throughout the book. For example, Solomon's instructions for raising children are dispersed throughout Proverbs like morsels of chocolate in a chocolate chip cookie. One bite won't get them all. If you want to taste all the sweetness of Solomon's wisdom on child raising, you'll have to eat the whole book, not just one verse.

It's highly dangerous not to search out all of Proverbs' wisdom on a given subject. For example, in Proverbs 17:8 Solomon says, "A bribe is a charm in the sight of its owner; wherever he turns, he prospers." Taken by itself, that proverb might seem to encourage giving bribes as a legitimate way to obtain success. However, other proverbs note that obtaining profit by illegal means such as bribes will have unexpected, painful consequences: "He who profits illicitly troubles his own house..." (15:27a). Do you want trouble at home? Fights with your wife? Kids on drugs? Then use bribes to get ahead. Comparing 17:8 with 15:27, a wise person realizes that the juicy worm of a bribe hides the sharp hook of painful consequences.

In the same way, it would be dangerous to fix your attention on Proverbs 10:15, "The rich man's wealth is his fortress," without balancing it with Proverbs 18:11: "A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his own imagination." Job was the richest man in the east, and his wealth didn't shield him from calamity. If Job's bank account was a false fortress, yours probably will be as well.

Derek Kidner illustrates the fact that one proverb rarely supplies all of God's wisdom on a subject by contrasting two extra-biblical proverbs: "*Many hands make light work* is not the last word on the subject," concludes Kidner, "since *Too many cooks spoil the broth*."⁶⁹ Many workers in the kitchen make the preparations for a church meal go quickly. However, it is also true that if every lady in the kitchen adds salt to the soup when she walks by the pot, the meal will be inedible.

A USEFUL PROJECT

To be a wise student of Proverbs, you must search Proverbs for *all* it says on the topic you are studying. But neither you nor I can remember every verse in Proverbs on a specific subject. Concordances and topical Bibles help, but they often overlook key verses. For example, they would not list 15:27 as a balancing proverb for 17:8 because 15:27 doesn't use the word *bribe*. What you need is a complete topical concordance of the book of Proverbs—every important verse in Proverbs listed under headings that make sense to you.⁷⁰ The only way to own such a tool is to make it yourself.

To study Proverbs for God so that you can preach Proverbs for God, you should do the following: Read one chapter of Proverbs every day for a month. As you read, keep a notebook beside you, and write down every topic that strikes you as important—pride, humility, foolishness, laziness, receiving rebuke, sexual purity, business practices, the family, wealth, the tongue—everything. Under those headings, note every verse that speaks to that subject (some verses will fit in more than one category). By the end of the month, you'll have a priceless tool for studying the book of Proverbs. With that topical index, you'll be able to preach from Proverbs, confident that your sermons contain all of Solomon's tasty morsels on that subject.

⁶⁹ Kidner, *The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, & Ecclesiastes*, 26.

⁷⁰ Joel James, *Counselling from Proverbs*, unpublished class syllabus, 2006.

CONCLUSION

Let me close with a reminder that Proverbs is a book of sanctification, not self-help. What's the difference? Self-help is human effort expended on moralistic improvement. It's change without Christ. It's the fruit of the Spirit with the Spirit left out. Such change is not your goal. When preaching Proverbs, your goal is not to make bad people better; it's to make dead people alive. Only Christ can do that. Your goal is not to encourage believers to apply Proverbs so that they'll achieve some kind of moral self-sufficiency—good living apart from Christ's intervention. Proverbs used that way is Proverbs misused.

When you preach Proverbs, don't leave Christ behind. Instead, constantly remind your people that living out the wisdom of Proverbs is impossible (and useless) apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ. Regularly direct your people's attention to Christ as the one who changes them through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Turn loose the lion of Proverbs, but as you do so, don't forget the Lion of the tribe of Judah. To make sure that your preaching from Proverbs is Christian preaching and not merely moralistic lectures on self-improvement, study and preach Proverbs with this in mind: "As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him" (Col 2:6).

ANSWER KEYS FOR THE EXERCISES

IDENTIFYING PARALLELISM

18:21 synth. 17:27 synon. 29:17 synth. 19:21 anti. 24:16 anti. 27:17 comp.
25:15 synth. 17:28 synon. 29:25 anti. 26:21 comp. 29:11 anti. 25:28 comp.
25:21 synth. 28:13 anti. 17:17 synon. 29:25 anti. 25:23 comp. 16:28 synon.
29:23 anti. 21:25 synth. 26:14 comp.

DISTINGUISHING ABSOLUTE AND AXIOMATIC PROVERBS

6:16-19 absolute 3:3-4 axiomatic
3:9-10 axiomatic 23:4-5 axiomatic
21:31 absolute 28:23 axiomatic

CHAPTER TWELVE

STUDYING PSALMS

John Calvin said that mankind's two greatest needs are a true knowledge of self and a true knowledge of God. We need a true knowledge of self—a knowledge that we are sinful, helpless, and desperate—because such knowledge spurs us to know God. "We cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves," says Calvin.⁷¹ Furthermore, we need a true knowledge of God because it is only in knowing Him (and in being known *by* Him) that we are rescued from our desperate estate (Gal 4:9).

If Calvin is right—and I believe he is—then every preacher should preach from the Psalms at least several times a year. Why? The Psalms specialize in teaching a true knowledge of self and a true knowledge of God. First, the Psalms teach you a true knowledge of yourself: your sin and weakness.

I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. (51:5)

For my iniquities are gone over my head; as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me. (38:4)

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. (32:3)

All our days have declined in Your fury; we have finished our years like a sigh. (90:9)

Surely every man at his best is a mere breath. (39:5)

Be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. (25:16)

O Lord, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me. (3:1)

My heart is in anguish within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me. (55:4)

But a true knowledge of self is useless without a true knowledge of God, and no book of the Bible teaches a true knowledge of God more clearly than the Psalms.

Holy is the Lord our God. (99:9)

⁷¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, ed. by John T. McNeill, vol. 20 in The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:37.

God is a righteous judge If a man does not repent, He will sharpen His sword. (7:11-12)
Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. (115:3)
Once God has spoken; twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God. (62:11)
Where can I flee from Your presence? (139:7)
Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever. (45:6)
The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.
(103:8)
Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised ... His greatness is unsearchable. (145:3)
Taste and see that the Lord is good! (34:8)

CHALLENGE AND REWARD

Studying the Psalms is not a task for the fainthearted. In one Psalm, you stand on a mountaintop praising God; in the next, you are cast into a bottomless pit of despair. In fact, sometimes the psalmist takes you from peak to pit in one psalm. Furthermore, a canyon-like gap lies between the Old Testament culture and our own; there are as many genres in the Psalms (wisdom, enthronement, lament, thanksgiving, etc.) as there are shoes in a rich woman's closet. If that weren't enough, the Psalms are songs or poems, and as Tremper Longman complains, "Poetry in any language is difficult to penetrate."⁷²

But the rewards of preaching the Psalms are worth the labor of studying them. If you are reluctant to preach from the Psalms, try this experiment with your congregation. Ask them what Psalm 23 is about and what Matthew 3 is about. Every single person will know the basic content and message of Psalm 23; few, if any, will know the content of Matthew 3. The point? In the Psalms God communicates truth in a powerful, captivating manner. Don't let that power go to waste! Preach the Psalms! Open the cage and let the lion, Worship, loose. When he bursts forth, shakes his mane, and roars with the majestic voice of God, idolatry and self-preoccupation slink away like jackals banished from a kill.

The subject of how to study the Psalms requires a book, not a chapter. Therefore, I'll limit myself to four instructions on studying, block diagramming, and outlining the Psalms.

⁷² Tremper Longman, III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 14.

1) LOOK FOR PARALLEL STRUCTURE

As with the book of Proverbs, studying the Psalms starts with an understanding of parallel structure. Derek Kidner writes of the Psalms, "The fundamental characteristic of this poetry was ... its way of matching or echoing one thought with another."⁷³ Synonymous and synthetic parallelism are the most common, but all the various types of parallelism are found in the Psalms.

Synonymous Parallelism (A=B):

Why are you in despair, O my soul?
and
Why have you become disturbed within me. (42:5)

Synthetic Parallelism (A+B):

I will give thanks to the Lord with all my heart
[and beyond that]
I will tell of all your wonders. (9:1)

Antithetical Parallelism (A≠B):

Evildoers will be cut off
but
those who wait for the Lord, they will inherit the land (37:9)

Comparative Parallelism (A=B!):

As the deer pants for the water brooks
so my soul pants for You, O God. (42:1)

⁷³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 2.

2) IDENTIFY (IF POSSIBLE) THE HISTORICAL SITUATION OF THE PSALM

The psalmists were not professional song writers paid by a music company to sit in a room somewhere and compose catchy lyrics about God. They were men who, moved by the Spirit, wrote about life and God—*their* lives and God. They wrote about their personal pains and joys; they wrote about God's role in their dangers and delights; they wrote about God's role in their nation's disasters and deliverances.

David, for example, often wrote about real life situations; therefore, many of his psalms have their roots in a specific historical event. Identifying that event can be the key to interpreting and preaching that psalm.⁷⁴ Sometimes it's easy, as in the case of Psalm 3, where the title or superscription reads, "A psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son." That makes it clear that you should interpret Psalm 3 in light of the events of Absalom's rebellion in 2 Samuel 15-17.⁷⁵ When David wrote, "Many are rising up against me," and "I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people" (3:1, 6), he wasn't speaking figuratively. He was talking about Absalom and his army of fellow mutineers: "The conspiracy was strong, for the people increased continually with Absalom" (2 Sam 15:12).

Psalm 51 also bears such a superscription: "A psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." Although neither Psalm 32 nor Psalm 38 carry an explanatory title, it's likely that they were also written after the shameful Bathsheba incident.

PSALM 24

In other cases, identifying the historical situation that gave birth to the psalm will be more difficult, but the content of the psalm will provide an unmistakable clue as to the circumstances in which it was written. For example, consider the second half of Psalm 24.

⁷⁴ Kenneth L. Barker, "Praise," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament*, ed. by D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 227.

⁷⁵ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1983), 72. Craigie comments, "Although the historical value of the superscriptions of the Psalms is of uncertain significance ... it is wise to begin the consideration of a psalm in the light of its superscription, where present."

O gates, lift up your heads

and

O ancient doors, be lifted up

that

the King of glory may come in!

Who is the King of glory?

The Lord strong

and

mighty

The Lord mighty in battle. (24:7-8)

In Psalm 24, David called the city gates to stand at attention because God Himself was entering to take up residence in Jerusalem. Did this reflect an event in the life of David? It did.⁷⁶ Since the days of Samuel, the ark of the covenant had resided at Kiriath-jearim, a small town west of Jerusalem. The ark had come to rest there following its capture and subsequent return by the Philistines during and just after the time of Eli the high priest (2 Sam 4:1-7:2).

More than just a storage box for the Ten Commandments, the ark of the covenant was the mercy seat, the visible throne of the invisible God of Israel.⁷⁷ David wrote Psalm 24 to commemorate the transfer of God's visible, earthly throne from Kiriath-jearim to Jerusalem. The God who had conquered the Egyptians during the Exodus, and who had more recently subdued the five cities of the Philistines, was coming home—the Lord mighty in battle.

Creative poet that he was, David didn't address the *people* regarding God's glory; he spoke to the *gates* of Jerusalem through which the ark would pass. When a victorious king enters

⁷⁶ Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 113.

⁷⁷ Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by George E. Day, fourth ed. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1888), 257.

his capital city, the soldiers guarding the gate stand a little straighter; they hold their heads a little higher. In this case, when the visible throne of the invisible God was carried into Jerusalem, David called the gates themselves to stand at attention; they were stand up straight so that God wouldn't have to duck His head as He passed through their doors.

The rest of Psalm 24 comes into focus as you consider that historical setting. God might be taking up residence in Jerusalem, but unlike the puny, nothing-gods of the nations, Yahweh was no local deity. His territory extended far beyond Jerusalem: "The earth is the Lord's and all it contains" (v. 1). Yahweh's dominion was not confined to the circuit of Jerusalem's walls.

But why did David add in verses 3-4 an assurance that those with clean hands and a pure heart can live on God's holy hill? Three months previously, when David first tried to move the ark to Jerusalem, God had struck dead a man named Uzzah for (mis)handling the ark (2 Sam 6:6-7). "This thing kills people!" was the nervous rumor in the streets of Jerusalem. David included verses 3-4 to reassure his subjects that if they handled matters correctly, they could live safely with God, and even enjoy His blessings (v. 5a).

It would be a terrible crime to imagine a historical situation and impose it on a psalm. But if the superscription or the content of a psalm clearly points to a specific historical event, then you should make reference to that event as you study and preach the psalm.

3) OUTLINE A PSALM USING THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALM ITSELF

If you are like most Christians, when you read a psalm, you tend to snatch one line from it, and focus on that line only. That's easy to do, because the Psalms are full of comforting, stimulating, compelling, and imagination-capturing individual statements. Nonetheless, that practice is very dangerous, especially when you are studying to preach a psalm. You don't want to impose your ideas on a psalm or focus on only a small slice of the psalmist's message; you want to preach the message of the whole psalm. The best way to do this is to let the psalm shape the clay of your sermon outline. Rather than impose a contrived, arbitrary outline on a psalm, always

outline it following the structure of the psalm itself. Let's consider three examples: Psalms 3, 23, and 33.

PSALM 3

Psalm 3 is relatively easy to outline because the Hebrew word, *selah*, marks the logical breaks or transitions in David's thought. (The untranslatable word *selah* often marks stanza breaks in a psalm, but not always.⁷⁸)

O Lord

How my adversaries have increased!

Disaster

Many are rising up against me.

Many are saying of my soul,

"There is no deliverance

for him

in God."

Selah. (3:1-2)

But

Dependence

Thou, O Lord, art a shield about me

My glory

and

the One who lifts my head.

I was crying to the Lord

with my voice

and

He answered me

⁷⁸ Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 76.

from His holy mountain.

Selah. (3:3-4)

I lay down and slept

Deliverance

I awoke

for

the Lord sustains me.

I will not be afraid

of ten thousands of people

who have set themselves against me round about.

Arise, O Lord

Save me, O my God!

for

Thou hast smitten all my enemies

on the cheek

Thou hast shattered the teeth

of the wicked.

Salvation belongs

to the Lord

Thy blessing be upon Thy people!

Selah. (3:5-8)

It is not unusual for the psalmists to include a key word in their songs that serves as a road sign pointing to their overall message. In Psalm 3, it is the word translated *deliverance* in 3:2 and *salvation* in 3:8. With the theme of deliverance in mind, it's relatively simple to look at our block diagram and summarize the three sections of Psalm 3 with a textual-marker outline. The opening two verses speak of *David's disaster*, Absalom's treacherous and widely supported attempt to

overthrow his father's government. Verses 3-4 describe *David's dependence* on God, and offer three reasons for it. The final section summarizes *David's deliverance*: a good night's sleep and a peaceful heart based on God's past expertise at defeating David's enemies. If God had shattered Goliath's teeth, then He could handle Absalom too. The theological message you and your congregation need to apply? God owns deliverance (v. 8), but graciously shares it with those who, like David, faithfully depend on Him in their Absalom-like disasters.

PSALM 23

The Lord is my shepherd

Shepherd Illustration

I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul;

He guides me in the paths of righteousness

for His name's sake

Even though

I walk through the valley

of the shadow of death

I fear no evil

for

You are with me;

they comfort me, Your rod

and

Your staff.

(23:1-4)

You prepare a table

Banquet Host Illustration

before me
in the presence of my enemies;

You have anointed my head with oil;
My cup overflows. (23:5)

Surely
goodness and lovingkindness will follow me
all the days
of my life

and
I will dwell
in the house
of the Lord
forever. (23:6)

David built this song around two images, two illustrations of God's care: shepherd (vv. 1-4) and banquet host (v. 5). The shepherd guards, guides, and gives life. The banquet host dispenses joy. The results of God's abundant care are listed in 23:6. We can summarize the psalm this way: "In Psalm 23, you find two heartwarming illustrations of God's gracious care for His children that assure you of His protection and love even in your darkest trials."

One of the reasons I'm such a big fan of block diagramming is nothing helps me grasp the slippery eel of a psalm's structure and message faster than seeing it laid out in a block diagram. When looking at the block diagram of Psalm 23, I turn into the boy gazing at a disassembled lawnmower engine: "*Now* I see how it works!"

PSALM 33

Sometimes a psalm can be outlined by tracking the theological themes it develops. Psalm 33 provides an example of this. The psalm opens, as many psalms do, with an introductory call to worship (33:1-5) that leads you into the body of the psalm in 33:6-19. The change from third person (he, them, the nations, the king, etc.) to first person (our, we, us) in 33:20-22 marks a transition from the body of the psalm to the writer's conclusion.*

In the body of the psalm, the author focuses on three attributes of God. First, God's *power* as illustrated by His mind-blowing ability to call the universe into existence with nothing more than a spoken word: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (33:6, 8-9).

God's incomparable power determines that He is also *sovereign*—His plan stands: "The Lord nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation" (33:10-11). In 33:13, the psalmist shifts his attention to God's *omniscience*: "The Lord looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men ... [He] understands all their works" (33:13, 15b). Any outline that adequately summarizes the content of this psalm must embrace those attributes: the plastic shopping bag of this sermon will have three oranges in it. But why *those* three attributes? Was the psalmist penning profound, but somewhat random thoughts about God? I don't think so.

THE LIFE SITUATION OF PSALM 33

Let's go back for a moment to our second principle, identifying (if possible) the historical situation of the psalm. Psalm 33 includes these lines: "The king is not saved by a mighty army; a warrior is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a false hope for victory; nor does it deliver anyone by its great strength" (33:16-17). Frankly, those two verses seem out of place as you study

*Always pay attention to such transitions between first, second, and third person. Not only do they identify who is speaking to whom, they can also mark a move from one section of a psalm to another.

the psalm. The lines just before and just after speak of God's omniscience. Why this sudden preoccupation with armies, warriors, horses, and battles? While I can't be dogmatic about it, I suspect that in 33:16-17, the psalmist gives you a glimpse of his circumstances, the situation that compelled him to write this meditation on God's power, sovereignty, and omniscience.

War was as common in ancient Israel as sand in the Sahara. If the Philistines or the Pharaohs weren't marching across your land, then you probably faced lightning raids by the nomadic Amalekites or the bloodthirsty Ammonites. Every morning you had to get up and peek out your front door to discover which army was camped in your fields that day. In that setting, a self-reminder of God's incomparable power was not just random theological musing. A meditation on God's ability to frustrate the plans of the nations was not throw-away theology. For the author of this psalm, the fact that God looked from heaven and saw all the sons of men was important, but it was doubly, triply important that God saw *him*: "The eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness" (33:18). Facing armies, warriors, horses, and battles, and with no human hope of victory, the psalmist took special comfort in the fact that God sees those who fear Him.

In other words, the song writer focused on the three attributes of God that most comforted him in the midst of his dangerous situation. What plural noun summary will capsulize the theological themes of this psalm? I suggest something like this: "In Psalm 33, we discover three attributes of God that remind us that the fear of the Lord is the fear that drives out all other fears."

4) LOOK FOR REPEATED WORDS OR THEMES

In Psalm 121, the song writer used various forms of the Hebrew root *shamar* (to keep or to guard)⁷⁹ six times. I've highlighted them in our block diagram.

⁷⁹ John E. Hartley, "שָׁמַר" in *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., ed. by R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:939.

I will lift up my eyes
to the mountains
From where shall my help come?
My help comes
from the Lord
who made heaven and earth.

He will not allow your foot to slip
He who **keeps** you will not slumber
Behold,
He who **keeps** Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is your **keeper**;
The Lord is your shade on your right hand.

The sun will not smite you by day
nor
the moon by night.

The Lord will **protect** you from all evil
He will **keep** your soul
The Lord will **guard** your going out and your coming in

from this time forth
and
forever.

When combined with the two uses of the word *help* in verses 1-2, the psalmist's repetition of the words *keep*, *guard*, and *protect* points you unerringly to his theme.

Psalm 121 was also tied to a specific historical situation.* It is labelled "A Song of Ascents," meaning that it was one of a group of fifteen songs (Psalms 120-134) that were sung especially as the Jews travelled to Jerusalem to worship at the Temple during annual feasts such as the Passover.⁸⁰ It appears that these psalms were called songs of *ascent* because all the roads that lead to Jerusalem go *up*. Whether you approach Jerusalem from the east, west, north, or south, you end by going uphill.

Having travelled on foot for days in the oven-like heat of Palestine, at some point the worshipers would round a corner of rock or top a rise in the dusty road and suddenly see Jerusalem and its central jewel, the Temple, gleaming ahead of them. What a sight for weary travellers! Looking up, the pilgrims would burst into song, praising the God that no building can contain: "I will lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth" (121:1-2). Although tired from their journey—their eyes red-rimmed from squinting into the Palestinian sun, their feet sore from the stony paths, and their legs exhausted from walking endless kilometres—although they were tired, they knew their Keeper neither slumbered nor slept.

REPEATED WORDS IN PSALM 33

Repeated words are neon lights that advertise the theme of a psalm. They can also advertise the theme of a section within a psalm, as is the case in Psalm 33. In Psalm 33:13-15, the author's repetition of the word *all* points unmistakably to the attribute of God under consideration in that section: God's omniscience, the fact that He is *all*-knowing.

* Don't get the impression that this is true of all psalms. Many have no discernable historical situation.

⁸⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1975), 429.

The Lord looks from heaven

He sees all the sons of men

He looks out

from His dwelling place

on all the inhabitants of the earth,

He who fashions the hearts of them all

He who understands all their works. (33:13-15)

CONCLUSION

There is much more to say about studying the Psalms, but those four principles provide a nudge in the right direction: look for parallel structure; look for a historical situation if there is one; compose your sermon outline using the structure of the psalm itself; and keep an eye out for repeated words and themes.

I enthusiastically encourage you to preach the New Testament: preach Mark's good news about Jesus Christ; preach Paul's profound doctrines of salvation. But as you do so, don't forget Proverbs and Psalms. Someday, I'll come visit your church, and when I do, I want to find those pages of your congregation's Bibles well-worn—bent and brown—because their preacher preaches them often. Open the cage! Let the lions loose!

CONCLUSION

EXPOSITORY STUDYING

Everyone has heroes, preachers included. If you're a student of church history, you probably share some of my heroes. One, for example, is John Chrysostom, the Greek church father, whose verse-by-verse expositions of the Scripture were so eloquent that his contemporaries called him "the Golden-mouthed." Another is Martin Luther, whose sermons were used by God as a battering ram to shatter the gates of the fortress called Roman Catholicism. Renowned as a theologian, John Calvin was also an expository preacher. Every second week Calvin preached daily, including two sermons on Sundays. In fact, during his twenty-five year ministry in Geneva, Calvin expounded almost the whole Bible.

In Scotland, John Knox is reputed to have splintered pulpits with the enthusiastic pounding of his fist as he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. In England, the preaching baton was passed from hand to hand as men like John Wycliffe, Hugh Latimer, Thomas Watson, John Owen, John Bunyan, John Wesley, and George Whitefield opened their Bibles and announced, "Thus saith the Lord." In America, Jonathan Edwards warned sinners of the unspeakable horrors of falling into the hands of an angry God. In England in the 1800s, Charles Spurgeon was enthroned as the Prince of Preachers.

A NEW HERO

As preachers, we all have heroes. But as we conclude this book, I want to give you a new hero: Ezra the scribe. As the spiritual leader of the revival under Nehemiah, Ezra was one of the great pulpiteers of the Old Testament.

All the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had

given to Israel They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading. (Neh 8:1, 8)

Ezra the scribe personified expository preaching: he read the text, explained the text, and applied the text. But more than that, Ezra personified expository *studying*. That's what makes him my hero. Everyone wants to preach, but Ezra understood that to preach for God, you must first study for God.

Ezra 7:6 says of him, "He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses." The Hebrew actually says that Ezra was a scribe *quick* in the law of Moses. When I was growing up, we played a game called sword drill. The leader of the game would shout out a verse reference, and the first person to find that verse in his Bible and read it out loud was the winner. Ezra was the all-time champion at sword drill. When it came to God's word, he was quick; nobody beat him to the draw.

There was no secret to Ezra's skill: "Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). The cord of Ezra's commitment to God's word had three strands—studying, practicing, and preaching⁸¹—and as Solomon reminds us, three strands makes for a very strong rope (Eccl 4:12).

EZRA'S THREE COMMITMENTS

First, Ezra set his mind to study God's word. The word translated *study* meant to investigate or to seek with care. It was the word you would use of a detective painstakingly searching the scene of a crime for a single hair, a single thread, a single clue as to the murderer's identity. Ezra approached the word of God with a relentless diligence and an insatiable curiosity. He couldn't stop asking, *Why? How? Where? When?* and *How many times?* as he rummaged through the Pentateuch, ransacking the law of Moses to gather all its treasures.

An Ezra-like commitment to studying isn't easy. First, it's hard work, and you and I are water—we prefer to run downhill, not up. But even if you love studying, you'll have some hurdles to clear if Ezra is going to be your hero. For example, African congregations rarely understand the

⁸¹ George J. Zemek, "Grammatical Analysis and Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, John MacArthur, Jr. and The Master's Seminary faculty, (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1992), 163-5.

time and effort necessary to produce expository sermons. Therefore, your congregation members will think nothing of interrupting the time you have set aside to prepare your sermons. They will visit often, stay long, and chat for hours. You aren't going to change that because in Africa relationships are everything. Therefore, to be an Ezra, you'll probably have to become an early riser. Study every morning from five until eight. No one visits during those hours; the telephone rarely rings. Having studied early, the rest of your day is free for your other shepherding responsibilities.

Over time, your church will learn to respect your study hours, especially when they see the difference it makes in your sermons. My wife once visited the mother of a young man in our congregation. Upon her arrival the woman asked, "Where's your husband?" To which my wife responded, "He's at home studying for his sermons." The woman seemed astounded by this, and after a moment of perplexed silence she said, "He has to study in order to preach?" That tells you a lot about the sermons she had heard her whole life! If you preach wind and nonsense on Sunday, your congregation will say to themselves, "He doesn't have to study to preach *that*." On the other hand, if your sermons combine clear and passionate explanations of the text with powerful and convicting applications, your people will give you the study time you need.

Another way to help your congregation come to grips with the time required to prepare good sermons is to encourage them to become readers. Although there are many blessed exceptions, as a rule, most African Christians are not enthusiastic readers. They *can* read, but they prefer other pastimes. However, as they begin to read both their Bibles and other solid Christian literature, they will realize the time study requires. As an added benefit, they will also become more and more fond of expository preaching: reading churches want nothing else.

So, Ezra should be your hero because he was a student of God's word before he was a preacher of God's word. But a cranium crammed with Bible facts isn't all there is to being a God-approved preacher. Therefore, Ezra also set his heart to *practice* the law of the Lord. Extensive Bible knowledge, even when combined with a preacher's eloquence, adds up to a big fat zero if you don't live what you've learned. I have always been leery of overweight doctors who smoke. Just how well do they know their stuff if they indulge in destructive habits like overeating and

smoking cigarettes? It works the same way with preachers. Preachers who don't live the truths they know should *not* be trusted by God's people. In fact, such preachers should be disbarred from practice.

Ezra's third commitment was "to teach [God's] statutes." The word *teach* in Ezra 7:10 is related to the Hebrew word for an ox goad, a pointed stick used by a cart driver or plowman to prod his lazy or reluctant animals to lean into the harness. As a preacher, Ezra was an ox goad in the hands of God, jabbing spiritually toughened rumps. Nonetheless, like thirsty sheep to water, those who wanted to know and obey God's word gathered to hear Ezra preach: "The heads of the father's households ... were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law" (Neh 8:13). God's word is the water of life; Ezra was the tap.

THE FINAL WORD

Ezra is one of my heroes, and it's my hope that this book will make him one of yours too. In simple terms, Ezra preached well because he studied well (I'm sure he used block diagrams!). In the pulpit you might have a voice like thunder and gestures like lightning, but if you don't resay what God said in His word, your sermons are noise and nothing, storm clouds without rain. But when you set your heart on the expository studying you've learned in this book, the rain begins to fall. It pours down. It brings life. The drought is broken.

Feed grain; bring rain. You can describe the incomparable benefits of God's word in a lot of ways. The Bible is the voice of the Father, the revealer of the Son, the sword of the Spirit: there is no word like God's word. Therefore, preach for God by setting your heart on Ezra's three commitments. As you do so, pay special attention to the initial one. Why? Because to preach for God, you must first study for God.

Ezra had set his heart

1. to study the law

of the Lord

and

2. to practice it

and

3. to teach His statutes and ordinances

to Israel

(Ezra 7:10)

In Ezra 7:10, we find three commitments that make Ezra the hero of every expository preacher.

APPENDIX 1

BLOCK DIAGRAMMING EXERCISES

To sharpen the skills you learned in this book, make your own block diagram, interpretational outline, and plural noun summary of the following ten passages:

1 Peter 1:14-16	1 Peter 5:6-7	1 Peter 2:1-3
2 Tim 3:16-17	Colossians 2:8-12	Ephesians 4:1-3
Hebrews 12:1-2	Phil 2:14-16	Psalms 23
Titus 3:4-7		

It might help you to "strip" each text first, so that you can find the main clause. Once you have finished your diagram, outline, and plural noun summary, check yourself against the samples in this appendix (I've used the NASB Update version of each text). Make sure you give each text your best effort before you peek at what I did. Chances are, you'll come up with something as good or better.

A WARNING TO PERFECTIONISTS

While a block diagram is a wonderful tool, it is just that, a *tool*. Therefore, there's no need to strive for absolute perfection in the spacing of your diagram. It's a picture of your passage, not a work of art. Diagram correctly; be neat, tidy, and consistent: a mistake might make you mis-preach a passage. On the other hand, don't waste time trying to produce something that you could hang on the wall of an art museum.

1 Peter 1:14-16

As obedient children

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. | do not be conformed | <i>main verb</i> |
| | to the former lusts | |
| | which were yours in your ignorance | <i>relative</i> |
| 2. | but | <i>contrast</i> |
| | be holy yourselves also | <i>main verb</i> |
| | like the Holy One | |
| | who called you | <i>relative</i> |
| | in all your behavior | |
| | because | <i>causal</i> |
| | it is written | |
| | You shall be holy | |
| | for I am holy | <i>causal</i> |
-

This passage reveals *two secrets* to personal holiness that help adopted sons and daughters of God live like true sons and daughters of God.

1. *Non-conformity* to your unsaved lifestyle

- | | | |
|----|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| A. | childlike avoidance | (as obedient children) |
| B. | informed avoidance | (no longer walking in ignorance) |

2. *Conformity* to God your Savior

- | | | |
|----|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| A. | the obligation of the conformity | (the command) |
| B. | the imitation of the conformity | (like the Holy One) |
| C. | the extent of the conformity | (in all your behavior) |
| D. | the authority of the conformity | (the OT quotation) |

1 Peter 5:6-7

(v. 5 ... God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble)

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 1. | Therefore | <i>result</i> |
| | [you] humble yourselves | <i>main verb</i> |
| 2. | under the mighty hand
of God | <i>preposition</i> |
| 3. | that
He may exalt you
at the proper time | <i>purpose</i> |
| 4. | casting all your anxiety upon Him

because
He cares for you | <i>instrumental
participle
causal</i> |
-

This passage teaches *four fundamental principles* of personal humility that, if applied, will make you like your Savior—gentle and meek.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. The <i>prompting</i> of humility | (v. 5 ... Therefore) |
| 2. The <i>place</i> of humility | (under the mighty hand of God) |
| 3. The <i>purpose</i> of humility | (that He may exalt you) |
| 4. The <i>peace</i> of humility | (the casting of anxiety on God) |

1 Peter 2:1-3

Therefore

1. [you] long
for the pure milk
of the word *main verb*

 2. putting aside all malice
and
all deceit
and
hypocrisy
and
envy
and
all slander *temporal part.*
("after")

 3. like newborn babies *preposition*

 4. so that
you may grow
by it
in respect to salvation *purpose*

 5. if
you have tasted the kindness
of the Lord *conditional*
-

In 1 Peter 2:1-3, we find *five descriptions* of the one lust every believer should encourage.

1. A *truth* lust (of the word)
2. A *purified* lust (putting aside)
3. A *passionate* lust (like newborn babes)
4. A *growth-oriented* lust (so that you may grow)
5. A *salvation-driven* lust (in respect to salvation)

2 Timothy 3:16-17

1. All Scripture is inspired *main verb*
by God
and
2. profitable
- for teaching *prepositions*
for reproof
for correction
for training
in righteousness
- so that
the man of God may be adequate *result*
equipped for every good work *participle*
-

Second Timothy 3:16-17 proclaims *two truths* about God's word that determine its authority and effectiveness for preachers and Christians in general.

1. The *source* of Scripture
 - A. its Person (by God)
 - B. its procedure (inspired)

2. The *usefulness* of Scripture (profitable)
 - A. for doctrine
 - B. for conviction
 - C. for re-direction
 - D. for education
 - E. for equipping
 - the beneficiary of the equipping (the man of God)
 - the breadth of the equipping (for every good work)

Colossians 2:8-12

[You] see to it that

1. no one takes you captive

- A. through philosophy
- B. and empty deception
- C. according to the tradition of men
- D. according to the elementary principles of the world
- E. rather than according to Christ.

2. For

- A. in Him all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form and
- B. in Him you have been made complete and
- C. He is the head over all rule and authority and
- D. in Him you were also circumcised
 - i. with a circumcision [which was] made without hands
 - ii. in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ
 - iii. having been buried with Him in baptism in which you were also raised up with Him through faith

in the working of God,
who
raised Him from the dead.

Colossians 2:8-12 contrasts the theology of *two opposing sides* in the doctrinal war of the Colossian church, telling us what we should and should not teach in our own church.

1. The theology of *Satan's side*

- A. human wisdom
- B. deceptively attractive wisdom
- C. man's traditional wisdom
- D. worldly wisdom
- E. not-from-Christ or about-Christ wisdom

2. The theology of *God's side*

- A. the deity of Christ
- B. the complete work of Christ
- C. the authority of Christ
- D. the internal circumcision of Christ
 - i. its divine source
 - ii. its spiritual nature
 - iii. its parallel with Spirit baptism

Ephesians 4:1-3

Therefore

I ←→ the prisoner of the Lord

apposition

implore you
to walk

main verb
infinitive

in a manner worthy

of the calling

with which

you have been called

relative

1. with all humility
and

preposition (how)

2. gentleness

preposition (how)

3. with patience

preposition (how)

4. showing forbearance
to one another
in love

instru. participle

5. being diligent
to preserve the unity
of the Spirit
in the bond of peace

instru. participle

In this text, Paul shows us *five footsteps* on the path to Christ-worthy relationships in the church.

1. The footstep of *lowly mindedness*
2. The footstep of *strength under control*
3. The footstep of *slowness to anger*
4. The footstep of *loving tolerance*
5. The footstep of *peaceful unity*

Hebrews 12:1-2

1. Therefore *result*
- since
we have so great a cloud
of witnesses
surrounding us *causal*
2. let us also lay aside every encumbrance *1st main verb*
- and
- the sin
which
so easily entangles us *relative*
- and
3. let us run the race *2nd main verb*
- that
is set before us *relative*
- with endurance
- fixing our eyes *instr. participle*
- on Jesus,
the author
and
perfecter of faith *appositions*
- who
endured the cross *relative*
- for the joy
set before Him *preposition*
- despising the shame *circum. participle*
- and
- [who]

has sat down *relative*
at the right hand
of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:1-2 teaches *three tactics* that will help you to run the race of the Christian life victoriously.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Imitate</i> the great | (the cloud of witnesses in chap. 11) |
| 2. <i>Lighten</i> the load | (lay aside encumbrances and sin) |
| 3. <i>Run</i> the race | (let us run the race) |
| A. run enduringly | (with endurance) |
| B. run with a Christ focus | (fixing our eyes on Jesus) |
| • focused on His example | (who endured) |
| • focused on His victory | (who sat down) |

Philippians 2:14-16

- [You] do all things *main clause*
1. without grumbling *preposition*
or
2. disputing
3. so that *purpose*
you yourselves will prove to be blameless
and
innocent
children of God
above reproach
- in the midst of a crooked
and
perverse generation
- among whom *relative*
you appear
as lights
in the
world
4. holding fast the word of life *circum. participle*
- so that *result*
I will have reason to glory
in the day of Christ
- because *causal*
I did not run
in vain
nor
toil
in vain.

In this passage, Paul gives you *four instructions* for working out your salvation so that you can be a blameless child of God in a blameworthy world.

1. Be content (without grumbling)
2. Be gentle (without disputing)
3. Be godly (blameless, innocent, children of God, above reproach)
4. Be grasping (holding fast the word of life)

Psalm 23

1. The Lord is my shepherd *main clause*

[*as a result*]

I shall not want

[*because*] He makes me lie down
in green pastures

[*because*] He leads me beside quiet waters.

[*because*] He restores my soul;

[*because*] He guides me in the paths
of righteousness

for His name's sake *causal*

[*as a result*]

I fear no evil

even though *concessive*

I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death

for

You art with me

[*because*]

they comfort me Your rod
and
Your staff

2. Thou dost prepare a table *main clauses*

before me
in the presence of my enemies

Thou hast anointed my head with oil

My cup overflows

Surely
goodness and lovingkindness will follow me
all the days

of my life

and [*beyond that*]

Conclusion

[*as a result*]

I will dwell
in the house
of the Lord
forever

In Psalm 23, you find *two heartwarming illustrations* of God's gracious care for His children that assure you of His protection and love even in your darkest trials.

1. The *shepherd* illustration

A. Its first blessing: no lack

- due to God's feeding
- due to God's leading
- due to God's reviving
- due to God's guiding

B. Its second blessing: no fear

- due to God's presence
- due to God's protection

2. The *banquet host* illustration

- A. The blessing of victory
- B. The blessing of joy
- C. The blessing of abundance

Conclusion

- a man content in the presence of grace
- a man content in the presence of God

Titus 3:4-7

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 1. | But
He saved us | <i>contrast</i>
<i>main clause</i> |
| 2. | when
appeared the kindness
of God, our Savior
and
His love
for mankind | <i>temporal</i>
<i>apposition</i> |
| 3. | not on the basis of deeds
which we have done in righteousness | <i>relative</i> |
| | but
according to His mercy
by the washing of regeneration
and
[by] renewing by the Holy Spirit
whom He poured out
upon us
richly
through Jesus Christ, our Savior | <i>contrast</i>
<i>relative</i> |
| 4. | so that
we would be made heirs
according to the hope
of eternal life
being justified by His grace | <i>purpose</i>
<i>temporal part.</i>
<i>"having been"</i> |

In Titus 3:4-7, Paul gives us *four essential explanations* of salvation that every Christian must know.

1. The *who* of salvation (God)
2. The *when* of salvation (when God's kindness and love appeared)
3. The *how* of salvation
 - A. its non-contributors (our deeds)

- B. its motivation (His mercy)
 - C. its methods (washing and regeneration)
4. The *why* of salvation (to be made heirs)

APPENDIX 2

PLURAL NOUNS

Sometimes it's hard to find just the right plural noun with which to summarize your passage. The following list, while by no means exhaustive, might help you find just the plural noun you need.

abuses	admonitions	agreements	answers	areas
affairs	alternatives	applications	arguments	axioms
accusations	affirmations	angles	approaches	attributes
aspirations	assertions	assumptions	attitudes	avocations
actions	achievements	aberrations	adventures	accomplishments
afflictions	alarms	alterations	ambitions	
barriers	beginnings	beliefs	benefits	burdens
blessings	blows	blockades	blots	blunders
boasts	bonds	books	boundaries	breaches
calls	categories	causes	certainties	challenges
changes	characteristics	cares	commands	commitments
comparisons	conceptions	concessions	corrections	criteria
criticisms	crowns	comforts	cultures	customs
complaints	candidates	cancers	circumstances	caretakers
casualties	celebrations	charges	choices	collaborators
controversies				
dangers	debts	decisions	declarations	deeds
deficiencies	definitions	degrees	departments	details
differences	directives	disciplines	disclosures	discoveries
divisions	doctrines	doubts	doors	dreams
duties				
effects	extremes	examples	excesses	encouragements
exchanges	exclamations	experiments	exposures	expressions

facts	factors	faults	failures	fundamentals
falls	families	fears	feelings	fields
flaws	forces	forms	formalities	foundations
functions				
gains	gifts	graces	groups	guarantees
guides	gates	goads		
habits	handicaps	honors	hopes	hungers
ideals	ideas	idols	ills	illuminations
impacts	impediments	imperatives	implications	impossibilities
impressions	improvements	incentives	incidents	items
injunctions	injections	invitations	issues	
joys	judgements	justifications	keys	kinds
labors	lapses	laws	leads	lessons
levels	liberties	lights	limits	links
lists	loads	locations	losses	loyalties
marks	materials	means	measures	manifestations
members	memories	mercies	methods	ministries
miseries	misfortunes	mistakes	models	moods
motives	mountains	mysteries		
names	natures	necessities	needs	norms
notes	numbers			
objectives	objects	obligations	observations	observances
obstacles	occasions	occurrences	offenses	offers
offices	omissions	operations	opinions	opponents
options	orders	origins	organizations	
parables	paradoxes	parallels	particulars	parties
parts	paths	patterns	peaks	peculiarities
penalties	perceptions	perfections	performances	perils
periods	perplexities	persons	personalities	petitions
phases	pictures	pieces	places	plagues
plans	pleas	pledges	plots	points
positions	possibilities	powers	practices	prayers
precautions	predicaments	premises	preparations	prescriptions

pressures	principles	privileges	prizes	problems
processes	products	profits	prohibitions	promises
proofs	prophecies	propositions	prospects	provisions
punishments	purposes	pursuits		
qualifications	qualities	quantities	queries	quests
questions	quotas	quotations		
ranks	ratings	reactions	reasons	recommendations
records	recruits	references	regions	regulations
rejections	relapses	relations	relationships	responses
restraints	results	revelations	rewards	roads
roles	roots	routes	rules	
sacrifices	satisfactions	sayings	scales	scars
schools	schemes	seals	seasons	secrets
selections	sequences	services	shields	situations
skills	solutions	sources	spheres	states
statements	steps	stipulations	stresses	strokes
styles	subjects	sufferings	superlatives	supports
symptoms	systems			
taboos	tactics	talents	tasks	teachings
tendencies	tests	theories	thoughts	types
ties	times	titles	tokens	topics
traces	trials	triumphs	troubles	truths
uncertainties	undertakings	units	urges	uses
vacancies	values	variations	varieties	verifications
views	violations	virtues	visions	vocations
voices				
wants	warnings	ways	weaknesses	weapons
words	works	worrieswrongs		

Note: Whenever possible, use a specific word for your plural noun. If nothing else works (but only then!), you can use one of these generic nouns.

aspects components elements facets things