



PREACHING FROM NARRATIVE

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Preaching narrative books of the bible carries with it some challenges, but also plenty of joy. Here are some suggestions about how to go about it.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Know the whole story line. The narrative books of the Bible is not meant to be read like a phone book or a set of memory verses. We need to read large slabs of narrative and be carried along by the issues and questions that develop in the story line. Its always important to know how the narrative ends otherwise elements such as plot twists, irony and character development will not be fully understood. Knowing the whole story line will also help enable you to identify the main narrative units within the story line. As much as possible its good to only preach on one narrative unit at a time although this can be difficult since the units are often woven together in tight and creative ways.

Read like a reader. Yes, the Bible is God's word... but Biblical narratives are also well crafted stories. So read it in the same way that you read a novel. If there's a note of confusion, or tension or ambiguity, chances are it's there on purpose... so just keep reading. Look for answers to these tensions, confusions and ambiguities in the text rather than outside. Let hanging questions hang, don't try and resolve things too soon... just keep reading. Be sensitive to expectations raised in a passage and any associated climax in the narrative. Find good commentaries that train you to be sensitive to the narrative. Reading like a reader will therefore mean thinking about the following sorts of questions

- are there any words that seem particularly important?
- in what way does the main plot of the book develop within this passage?
- in what ways do the main characters of the book develop within this passage?
- does the passage make use of tension, irony, humor or other writing techniques?
- is there a dominant image within the passage?
- what emotions does the passage generate?
- is there a speech or conversation will captures the big idea of the narrative?
- does the passage have a climatic moment?

Visualise the passage. Because the narrative books of the bible describe real events its always helpful to mentally picture what is happening. Locations and geography are especially important to visualise. The original readers were probably reading of locations well known to them and so part of the power of the story would have been tied up with where the action is taking place. For example, in Mark's gospel there are two distinct miracles in which Jesus feeds several thousand people with only a minimum amount of food (Mk 6 & Mk 8). The significance of the second feeding is found in the fact that Jesus performs it in Gentile country. This would have been obvious and significant to the original readers.

It's not about you. We must keep remembering that, although every narrative passage has relevance for us, its **primary function is to teach us about Jesus Christ** (this includes the Old Testament as well as the New). In particular when preaching from a Gospel we must remember that its essentially about Jesus Christ's ministry *to Israel*. Failing to appreciate this will mean that we won't fully come to terms with the point of the passage and so may result in some seriously flawed application.

APPLYING THE TEXT

Descriptive not prescriptive. Much narrative is descriptive in nature rather than prescriptive. In other words, the text simply explains what happens without always passing judgement on whether it was good, bad or indifferent. For this reason we must always be very careful in using people as character studies. When we fall into the character-study model of reading, it's tempting to start reading ourselves into the role of the hero of the passage. Further, the character-study method relies on the value judgments of the reader as to what should be imitated and what shouldn't. Only indulge in character studies when there are indications that it's the intention of the narrative (can you think of any Gospel texts where that's the case?).

Don't over apply. Narrative is meant to be read in large slabs. Because of this we sometimes need to apply LESS rather than MORE. If the key point of a passage isn't apparent until later in the narrative, then we simply need to keep reading...it's true to say "Good things come to those who wait". For this reason its important to be sensitive to the narrative units of the text. Good application will watch the road ahead; good application will be sensitive to the overall thrust of the book – because the local narrative context is the single best measure of the values we're meant to attach to significant features of the story.

Discover pastoral intention. Every part of the Bible was written to encourage or shape the people of God. Work really hard at discovering the pastoral intention of the author. Remember, though - there's often a difference between the original audience of the text, and the people within the narrative itself. Make the pastoral intention of the passage the key element of your application. If we don't discover the authors pastoral intention our application will become naive and uncontrolled. At best the narrative will simply become an illustration of a biblical truth which actually comes from another part of the scriptures and not the narrative itself.

Avoid allegory. In a quest for Christian relevance, sometimes everything is seen to be symbolic of something in the Christian life. Here's an example: Jesus calming the storm (Mk 8) represents Jesus being able to calm the storms in our life and so if we just have faith (Mk 8:26) Jesus will give us smooth sailing throughout life. This sort of "word-association-application" needs to be avoided at all cost. We need to work hard at the text so that the narrative itself informs us how to apply it. Of course, sometimes things ARE symbolic but only when the narrative itself says so or else when some other part of scripture says so. Can you think of any examples of this?

COMMUNICATING THE TEXT

Bring narrative to life. Speaking in the present tense is the single best method of injecting interest into story-telling. Use other techniques to breath life into the narrative - illustrate distances with common modern landmarks, illustrate measures with concrete modern equivalents; judiciously weave them back into the narrative.

Split your series and hold your fire. Think through the shape of your sermon series. Make sure you keep the tension points alive for resolution at the right time. Don't tell everything at once, Try to identify narrative units that are held together by a single "big idea" that you can hang the sermon around. In your talk, try and say **one main thing one main way**.

Try to catch the emotion or mood of the original narrative. Preach in a way that moves people in the same way as the text.

Don't preach the same sermon every time. Its important to map out a series in advance and plan your application strategy when preaching through a narrative. Often the text is multilayered with several themes threading through it. Planning ahead helps you to evenly pace out when you bring each theme to light.