

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 *always* despises pride; the fear of the Lord is *always* 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 mispreach 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> |
| | but | <i>contrast</i> |
| 2. | 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 | <i>preposition (how)</i> |
| 2. | | gentleness | <i>preposition (how)</i> |
| 3. | with patience | | <i>preposition (how)</i> |
| 4. | showing forbearance | to one another
in love | <i>instru. participle</i> |
| 5. | being diligent | to preserve the unity
of the Spirit
in the bond of peace | <i>instru. participle</i> |
-

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)

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