

4 Steps for Sermon Preparation

Jeremy Hoover

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This is a long article, but hopefully useful both for preachers and for people interested in studying the bible.

I learned a "system" for bible study for sermon prep about 4 years ago. Walter Brueggemann wrote an article in an issue of the journal *Interpretation* called "That the World May Be Redescribed." It's available in *The Word Militant*, also by Brueggemann. In it, he suggested a 3-move method for studying the bible in light of sermon preparation.

The article itself was stripped down, but I've stripped it down even further. Hopefully this can help some of you busy preachers! Here are this 3 steps:

1. Rhetorical analysis.

Brueggemann suggested spending time with the text, thinking it over, seeing its internal connections, how it fits together. He wants you to move towards an outline of the text you are studying according to its rhetorical pattern.

I don't go that far with it. Every Monday, I photocopy the passage I'm preaching from on a piece of 8.5" x 14" paper. I try to position the passage in the top 1/3 of the page. (I learned this trick from Chris Erdman in Countdown to Sunday.) Then I block out a couple hours and write notes on the paper around the passage. I'll underline key phrases, draw connecting arrows from one sentence to another, and write down the connecting links I see.

What I'm trying to accomplish with this step is to arrive at the point of the passage. What was the author getting at? What is the main idea? This is useful for two reasons: 1) It gets me thinking already on Monday about the passage and its main idea; and 2) It provides plenty of time for moving towards practical thinking.

When I feel like I have on paper the flow of the passage and at least a semblance of a main point, I fold the paper in half, tuck it in my bible, and commence with the rest of my day. (That way, it's always with me, to pull out and review or add notes later in the day.)

2. Word study.

On Tuesday, I do word studies. This is probably different from what you normally consider to be a word study. I don't go "deep" into the Greek origins of words, but I use a concordance to trace how key words are used in the rest of the bible.

It's important to use a concordance for this step that is tied to the original languages because sometimes a key word in English will sometimes be translated the same way even though two or more different words (in Hebrew or Greek) are behind that translation. (For example, there are 3 different Greek words that are all translated as "love" in the New Testament. You need a Strong's Concordance, or some other good concordance, to tell which Greek word you are really looking at.)

During my rhetorical study, I often end up circling, underlining, or identifying key words in a passage. In a recent series on Judges, I noticed that the phrase, "The Spirit of the LORD came upon him," appeared in several of the stories. As I used my concordance to trace this phrase in Judges, I noticed how the narrator seems to use it in a pattern that illustrates how Israel was declining in their faith. Early in the book, the Spirit enabled the judge to be successful, but towards the end of the book, the Spirit's work in the judges was ineffective.

Noticing this allowed me to track the particular judge I was studying in a different narrative context than I would have without this word study. I might have been tempted to make an application about depending on the work of the Spirit within us, but the narrative context (arrived at through my word study) gave me a different focus about how we cooperate with the Spirit.

3. Agenda study.

On Wednesday, I do the third step, which the Bruegg calls "agenda study." For this step, he suggests we should analyze the agenda of the writer to get a handle on what interests he is promoting through his writing. This is also the step when you read commentaries and other resources.

To be honest, I don't spend a lot of time with the "agenda." I spend more time reading commentaries, books, and websites about the passage. I also spend a good deal of time thinking of creative ways to present this material. (Usually by now a clearer sense of the direction of the sermon is formed in my mind.)

Interlude: The One Thing

By Wednesday afternoon, I like to have a focus for my sermon crystallized on paper. I call it "The One Thing." I try to boil down my thinking to one main point, keeping it simple. There is no need in a sermon to talk about 4 or 5 things. Keep it simple. Provide one point and work all your sermon material around that one point. Keep it memorable.

So I come up with my "one thing." One application point also corresponds to this. Let me give you an example: In a recent sermon on Samson, my "one thing" was this: Samson was a strong man, but it doesn't matter how strong you *are* if you don't finish strong (he didn't). For me, this one thing illustrated the entire story of Samson--he started strong, "began" well (see 13:5), but didn't end well.

My one point of application was this: Finish strong by setting aside your personal idols so you can be set apart for God. In my sermon, I discussed how Samson's strength was an idol for him, something he kept going back to save him (instead of God). I encouraged us to be set apart for God and not to serve our idols. If we do this, we'll finish strong.

So focus on one point ("one thing") and one application.

4. Writing

The Bruegg didn't cover this, but to helpful, I will. On Thursdays, I write my sermon. I set aside most, if not all, of my afternoon for this. I'll often write from a coffeeshop.

Taking my notes, my "one thing," and my "one application," I sit down and write. Often this will take the form of a sermon handout where I collate my notes into one document with pastoral reflections. Other times I just write devotional thoughts.

But I always bring my sermon into focus around a particular narrative structure, specifically, that of a screenplay. I usually figure out how to approach my sermon with a 3-act structure. A good book for this is *The Writer's Journey*.

In Act One of a movie, the characters are introduced and it ends with the introduction of the problem. Likewise, I introduce the idea, usually through a personal story, with an element of tension--for example, how a difficulty in Christianity from my youth affected me.

In Act Two, a movie spends most of its time developing the tension so the viewers wonder how, or even if, the problem will be resolved. I offer wide-ranging vignettes that tap in to the experience of the listeners. Here, I really try to ratchet up the tension, to get them to see how the problem we are talking about is a serious problem that can affect their lives if they don't submit to the gospel. This is where I really develop my one point, showing, in the case of Samson, how Samson failed and how we do, also, when we follow his lead.

At the end of Act Two of my sermon, just like in a movie, the "solution" is offered that offers the hope to see things through to Act Three. In my sermon, it's always the introduction of the gospel, or, how God saves the day! In my Samson sermon, I discussed how Samson was "set apart" by God (as a Nazarene, but we are, too, through the Spirit). That was the key--we are enabled and empowered to live for God. We simply need to discard our idols to focus on him.

In Act Three, a movie generally ties up loose ends around the solution that was presented. In my sermon, this is where I bring in my one application. I focus on applying it, going back to some of the vignettes to show the difference relying on God instead of yourself can make.

In my Samson sermon, I asked the church to consider in which areas of their life they were most likely to rely on their own strength rather than God's. I used verses in the New Testament to show

how God has empowered us to live for him, and exhorted us to give up our idols to rely on him (quite in contrast to Samson).

I hope this outline helps you. I know that streamlining my process has helped me immensely, in preparation, reflection, and delivery.

I'd love some feedback on this article, so please leave comments so we can interact.