

## PREPARING TO PREACH

### PREFACE

This booklet has been adapted by Ian Flanders from talks given by Roger Prime on the radio programme 'Serving Today'. I am pleased to count Roger as a personal friend for over thirty years now. Roger and I were near neighbours in pastoral work in the early 1970s. He is the pastor of a Baptist church in the town of Beccles in the east of England, and he also lectures at the Suffolk Preachers' Seminary where his main responsibility is to teach New Testament studies.

This booklet is designed to give some important general advice to those involved in the preaching ministry. Good preparation of sermons is essential and a number of issues that need to be taken into account when working on our messages will be considered.

Derek French, Producer and Presenter of Serving Today.

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### Chapter 1 The importance of teaching the Bible

How important is it to teach the Bible? What place does this activity have in your church and in your ministry?

The importance of teaching the Bible is brought home to us in an incident recorded in scripture in Nehemiah chapter 8. As we are going to consider this chapter in some detail it is important to remind ourselves of its setting. God's people, Israel, had returned from 70 years of exile in Babylon and

they had found it hard to re-establish themselves in their homeland. It had been a real struggle to rebuild the temple and the walls of the city. Almost a century after they had returned from Babylon, Nehemiah had arrived to lead them in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and that work was now complete.

Nehemiah knew, however, that it was not enough to rebuild the city and make it safe. The people had been taken into exile in Babylon because of their failure to obey God and his Word. The people needed to be renewed in their devotion to the Lord and so in Nehemiah chapter 8 we find that they had been assembled in the square in front of the water gate so that Ezra could teach them from the Law of Moses.

Try to picture the scene as all the people of Jerusalem, the men, the women, the young and the old; all who were able to understand, stood in this square with Ezra standing on a high wooden platform in front of them. Ezra led the people in worshipping God, and then he opened up the book of the Law of Moses and began reading it to all the people. He was assisted in this task by a number of priests who are referred to in vv 7-8. These priests not only read from the Law but also explained it to the people so that they could understand the meaning of what was being read.

This illustrates the importance of teaching the Bible. It is not good enough just to read the scriptures alone, but they need to be explained by persons gifted of God, so that

believers and unbelievers alike might understand what the Word of God actually means. Public reading of the Word is important and valuable, but it is equally essential that it be explained.

What is also important is that when the people had understood the Word of God, as it was explained to them, their hearts were touched, for God spoke to them through his Word. The people began weeping as they realised how their forefathers had sinned against God and brought the exile upon the nation. They were probably aware of their own sin and failure as well and wept, fearing God's judgement might come on them. This was obviously a very moving experience.

Nehemiah then called on the people to stop weeping, not because it was wrong to repent of their sin, for chapter 9 shows us the people gathering to confess their sins to the Lord and to seek his mercy. Rather, Nehemiah tells the people that this day should be a day of rejoicing. The walls of the city had been rebuilt in just 52 days, a sign that God had blessed his people, and soon after, this same month, they would remember God's provision for the forgiveness of their sins as they observed the Day of Atonement. Similarly, they would later remember God's help during their 40 years in the wilderness as they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. The people were to share their food and drink with each other as they rejoiced in God's goodness towards them. Thus, the people responded to God's Word

with both sadness and joy, depending on the occasion and the circumstances.

The day following the reading of the Law in Nehemiah chapter 8, the heads of the families gathered with Ezra and the priests and Levites in order to be taught from God's Word again. As they were being instructed they understood from the Law of Moses that concerning the feast of Tabernacles which was to be observed during this seventh month, God had directed the people to build shelters from the branches of olive, myrtle and palm trees to live in while they celebrated this feast. They could not remember observing the feast of Tabernacles in this way. Apparently, this command had been neglected since the time of Joshua. The people knew how important it was for them to obey the Word of God so they sent instructions to all the people in Jerusalem to build shelters for themselves, as God had instructed, in order to celebrate correctly this feast of Tabernacles.

What follows are the most important lessons that we need to learn from this passage.

Both Ezra and Nehemiah knew just how important it was for the people to be taught from the Word of God at this key period in their history, as they re-established themselves in their homeland. We see three things happening in this chapter: firstly, the people were taught the Word of God and it was explained to them so that they could understand with their minds. Secondly, as they

understood the Word, so God spoke to their hearts and they responded to his Word with both sorrow and joy, and finally we see that the people were willing to be obedient to the Word as they saw those things that God required of them. Their wills had been moved and they acted upon the Word of God.

In our preaching and teaching of God's Word, the thing we long to see above everything else is the will of our hearers being moved so that they respond in obedience to God's Word. There is, however, no short cut. People's wills are moved when their heart has been touched by God and that will only really happen when they have understood with their minds what God is saying to them.

Our responsibility as preachers is to so teach God's Word that those who hear us will understand and as we apply the truth to their lives so God's Spirit will touch their hearts to receive his Word to them and move their wills so that they will obey. That is why it is so important that we are faithful in preaching and teaching the Word of God, for this is the means that God will use, by his Spirit, to bring about change in the hearts and lives of those who hear.

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## **Chapter 2 The big picture**

One of the dangers we face when we are preaching and teaching the Word of God is that we tend to think of the Bible as being made up of lots of different parts. There are some 66 books and these have been written in a number of different literary genres. "Literary genre" simply means

the style in which a particular document has been written. In the Bible there is historical narrative, poetry and prophecy. There are Gospels, there are proverbs, there are letters and there is apocalyptic literature. This variety of books was written by a number of human authors spanning quite a long period of history. The danger is that we lose sight of the truth that, behind the humanity of these written documents, the Bible has one divine author, our God who, through the Holy Spirit, inspired the human authors to write the books that we now find in our Bibles. "*All scripture is God-breathed.*" (2 Timothy 3:16) Not only does the Bible have one author but also there is a continuous and coherent theme running throughout the whole of scripture, recording God's plan and purpose of salvation. It is good for us to get a grasp of the overall message of the Bible, to see the big picture of what God has done, and is doing as he works in the world to carry out his purposes in salvation.

We can begin to get God's view on the history of his world by reading Matthew 1 verse 17. "*Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to Christ.*" These words come at the end of the genealogy of Jesus Christ and show that the history of the Old Testament period is divided into three eras: Firstly, from Abraham to David; secondly from David to the exile; and thirdly from the exile to the coming of Jesus. This view helps us to understand the big picture of the Bible.

The key to God's purpose is found in the promise he made to Abraham in Genesis 12 verses 1-3, where it is summed up in three simple ways: Firstly verse 1, *"The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'*" Here God promises a land in which to live to Abraham and his descendants. Then verse 2, *"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."* Here God promises that there would be a people to dwell in the land. Finally verse 3 - *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* Here God promises a special relationship to enjoy.

In other words, God calls Abraham to go to the land that he promises to give him, he promises to make of him a great nation and he promises to bless him and to make him a blessing to all nations. This final aspect of the promise was fulfilled with the coming of Christ and the preaching of the Gospel to all nations. Here, then, are the three key things in the purpose of God.

You may be wondering about the period before Abraham lived? How does that fit into the promises made to Abraham and the purposes that God revealed through them?

If we go to the account of creation in Genesis 1-3, we see that in his work of creation God made a place to live, this wonderful world and especially the Garden of Eden. He

also created a people to dwell there; he formed Adam and Eve who were to live in the garden. Finally he graciously granted Adam and Eve a special relationship to enjoy, God would meet with them in the garden. All this was, of course, spoiled by sin. Adam and Eve disobeyed God and as a result were shut out from the garden and from the presence of God.

God's purpose, however, is to restore men and women into a right relationship with himself. It should not surprise us, then, to discover this promise to Abraham whereby God would once again give a place to live, a people to live there and a relationship to enjoy.

As we trace through the Old Testament history from Abraham to David we see these promises being developed as God makes a great nation out of Abraham's son Isaac and his later descendants. In the book of Exodus we read of God entering into a covenant with this people. He would be their King. In Joshua we read of God bringing the people into the Promised Land. The history of the Old Testament reaches a golden age when God's king David is on the throne. Under his reign the people take full possession of the Promised Land and with the coming of his son Solomon the temple is built in the land as a sign of God's presence among his people.

For a moment it might seem that the promise of God has been fulfilled, but David fell into the sin of adultery and later Solomon's heart was led astray by his many wives.

David's reign was never the same after his unlawful liaison with Bathsheba, and from that time onwards the nation begins to decline. The books of Kings and Chronicles record the dividing of the nation, the exile of the northern kingdom Israel and then the southern kingdom Judah. The people never believed that they would be removed from the land, but when the Babylonian exile came it must have seemed as though God's promises had failed, for the people had been removed from the land.

We know however that it is impossible for God's purposes to be frustrated so what did he do to show that he would still keep the promises made to Abraham?

In the ministry of the prophets we see that God's promise was not lost. For example, Isaiah looks forward to the return of the people of Israel from exile and to the rebuilding and renewal of the city of Jerusalem – the promise of a place to live thus remains. The prophet Jeremiah witnesses himself the removal of the people from the land and denounces them as being no better than pagans with spiritually uncircumcised hearts but he foresees the day when they would return as a renewed people with God's law written in their hearts. The prophet Ezekiel sees God removing his glory from the land as the people go into exile, but he foresees the day when the temple would be rebuilt as the people are restored to the land, the sign that God would be present with them in the land. His book closes with the words "*The Lord is there.*"

This is a reminder and an assurance that there remained a special relationship to enjoy.

This return from exile took place and is recorded in the Bible in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The return from exile looks forward to the coming of Christ, who through his life, death and resurrection will reverse the effects of the fall and bring to fulfilment all the promises of God. See 2 Corinthians 1: 20, "*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ.*"

We see these same three aspects of God's promise to Abraham in the coming of Jesus Christ:

First, a new place to live: where hopes were once focused on the Promised Land and the Kingdom of Israel, they now focus on Jesus whom God has established as Lord and who heralds in a new Kingdom, a spiritual realm which exists wherever Jesus reigns over the hearts and minds of men and women.

Second, a new people: where once the nation of Israel was God's covenant community, the object of his faithful love, the people of the promise, these things are now true of the Church, the community of those who have been truly united to Christ by faith.

Third, a new relationship: God is present in the person of Jesus, reconciling men and women to himself and adopting them as his very own children. Christ, through the cross,

has cleared away the obstacle of sin and opened up the way whereby we might enter once again into fellowship with God.

And God has not finished yet, for the ultimate goal of history is seen in Revelation 21v1-4: *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’”* Here we see the ultimate fulfilment of God’s promises and purposes in:

- A place to live, there will be a new heaven and earth.
- A people to live there; the holy city represents the redeemed people of God from every nation and people, *“a multitude no-one can count”* (Revelation 7:9).
- A relationship to enjoy; the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them, there will be no more sin or death or pain, everything will be made new.

This is the big picture of God’s purpose, a picture that can help us to see the scriptures as a whole and to see how each individual part of scripture, which we might be teaching from, fits into the whole.

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### Chapter 3 Preaching in context

I am sure that you have had the experience of seeing a particular verse or passage in the Bible, which you have felt is very relevant to a current situation in the life of the church or in world events and you have been tempted to preach on that verse without stopping to think about its context. There is a danger that if we take a verse out of its context in the Bible, we could make it mean something very different from what God is saying to us.

An example will help me to show what I mean. Take Mark 10:17-22 where Jesus meets a young man who asked him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus replied saying, *“Young man, you lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”* Now we could take those words out of context and preach a sermon saying that anyone who wants to have eternal life must sell everything they own, give it to the poor, and become a follower of Jesus. However, this is not coherent with the message of the Gospel, to preach this would be to suggest that we could earn eternal life by our good works.

If, though, we look a little deeper into the context we see that this young man clearly thought that by keeping the

commandments he could earn eternal life. Although he claimed to have kept the commandments referring to his relationships with his fellow men, he needed to see that he could neither keep the first command to have no other god but the Lord, nor the last command which forbids covetousness. Jesus' comments were designed to help the young man to understand that he must abandon his trust in his riches and that attitude of self-confidence that suggested he could earn eternal life by keeping the commandments. Jesus' comments are not to be taken as an absolute commandment but as a piercing remark that exposes the self-righteous to the folly of their thinking.

So, then, how are we to relate the Biblical context to our present day situation?

One thing that will help us to preach God's Word in context is to imagine yourself looking out over the countryside and having two horizons or focal points. Maybe there is something near by that you are watching, but then there is also something in the distance that catches your eye. You are looking at two horizons, something that is very far away and something that is very near. In teaching God's Word we want to make it relevant to the world we live in and the people we minister to; this is the near horizon. However, the world of the Bible may seem far away and detached from our world, this is the distant horizon. It is only as we have looked at the distant horizon and understood our text or passage in the world in which it was first spoken and written, that we can then see its

relevance to our world today and to the congregation to whom we minister. As we teach God's Word against the background in which it was originally given, the distant horizon, we can then help them see how it is relevant to their own lives today, the near horizon, and thus apply God's truth in our contemporary world.

In order to understand the Word of God as given in its original context, we must take into consideration the following factors.

Firstly we need to ask ourselves where the book in which our passage is found occurs in the Bible and in the history of the Bible. Does it come in the Old Testament or the New Testament? If it comes before the time of Christ we must be careful not to preach as though the original readers would have known about Jesus in the way we do today. If it is an Old Testament book, where does it come in the history of the Old Testament? Once you get beyond the history of Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah you have to remember that the rest of the Old Testament books do not necessarily appear in chronological order. The prophets ministered during the period covered by the historical books and we must try to understand each prophet's message against the background of what occurs in the relevant historical narrative. In the same way the history of the early church recorded in Acts is a helpful backdrop that enables us to understand the context of the New Testament letters.

Secondly, we need to understand the type of literary genre or style of the book that we are teaching from. Is it an historical book? Is it prophetic, or poetry, or wisdom literature? Is it a Gospel narrating for us the life of Jesus, or a letter to an early church? Understanding the type of literature will help us to keep it in context.

Here is another example of what I mean: Take the book of Ecclesiastes, which begins with the words “*Meaningless! Meaningless! Says the teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is utterly meaningless.*” Now unless we understand that this book is wisdom literature in which the writer explores the meaning of life and concludes that life without God is utterly meaningless, we could preach the wrong message from those words. It would be easy to suggest that all life is meaningless, but of course life where God is at the centre is the exact opposite, it is full of meaning and purpose. In these first lines of Ecclesiastes, the author sets up a statement or idea that he will explore throughout the rest of the book and as the book proceeds we will discover to what extent the author believes this statement to be true or not. This style of argumentation needs to be taken as a whole rather than lifting individual verses out of their context.

My third point is that we need to understand how the truths taught in the verse or the passage that we are preaching from fit into the framework of the whole teaching of the Bible. In the last chapter I wrote about the big picture of what God’s purposes are in the Bible. We need to understand how the text we might be considering fits into

that big picture of God’s truth as revealed in the whole of the Bible? Does it say anything to us about the nature or character of God, the person of Jesus or his work in salvation? Does it help us understand more about the work of the Spirit or the return of Christ? Can we understand more about the nature of man, our need of salvation or the Spirit’s work in making our lives as believers more like Christ?

Then finally, when we have understood the verse or passage in these wider contexts, we need to ask some questions about the content in the book itself. Why was this particular book in the Bible written? What is it about? What is its main message? Why is this particular verse or passage in the book? Why does it come at this point in the flow of the book? What would the original readers have understood by these words?

It is only as we have understood the passage in its original context and heard what God was saying to the people of that day, that we can then seek to apply the truths to the world in which we live and to the lives of our hearers. That may all sound like very hard word, but if we are to be faithful in preaching and teaching God’s Word we must always work with these two horizons in view.

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#### **Chapter 4 From text to sermon (1) – General outlines**

All of us travel on journeys in our lives, whether short or long. Perhaps there may be times when you take someone with you on a journey who has not travelled that way

before and along the way there may be interesting and even exciting things you want to point out to them. In many ways, as preachers of God's Word, every sermon we preach is like taking our congregation on a journey and this is the picture I want us to have in our minds as we consider how to construct sermons.

I have called this chapter 'From text to sermon' because I want us to think about how we move from studying the Bible passage that we are to preach on, to preparing the actual message. In the last chapter I mentioned the importance of studying and understanding the context of the text that is to be the subject of our message. Once we have done that work and have really understood the passage it becomes necessary to construct the sermon.

Returning to the image of a journey, we must first of all have a sense of direction. If I am likening the sermon to taking a congregation on a journey, then the first thing we must think about is where we want to take them, that is the sense of direction. It is important in preparing the sermon to know where you are going. There are two things you can do to help you set this sense of direction into your sermon.

Firstly, have a theme sentence. Try to write down in one sentence what the verse or passage you are preaching on is all about, what the big idea is. Make this sentence as brief and clear as possible. You will only be able to communicate to other people what you have clearly understood for yourself. This sentence should help you to

express clearly the theme of your sermon. If there are too many ideas in this one sentence then perhaps you should preach more than one sermon on this passage so that you do not confuse your hearers.

Secondly, you need to have an aim sentence. Having written down your theme sentence, explaining the main teaching of the passage, try to write a sentence in which you express your aim in preaching this sermon. The aim should arise naturally out of the text and not be forced into it. You need to be clear about the application you will make to the lives of your hearers from this passage or text. This is to be your aim.

Here is an illustration. Suppose that you are going to preach on the passage from Colossians 1:15-20 where Paul writes about the greatness of Jesus Christ. Having looked at the context of this passage we know that Paul is writing this letter to these believers because he has learnt that they are being troubled by false teachers who are saying that it is not sufficient to trust in Jesus alone in order to be saved. Paul corrects this error in the teaching he gives in this text.

We might have a theme sentence which states that this passage shows how Jesus is fully God, ruling over and sustaining the whole of creation and ruling as head over the church.

The aim in teaching this passage is to show that if Jesus, as God, is able to sustain the whole universe, then he is more

than able to save the believer and sustain the life of his church. He is sufficient to supply all the needs of his people and there is nothing more we could ever need in addition to Christ.

I have found it helpful to try to find a title for the sermon that may sum up the theme and aim. For this sermon I used the title *“The Supremacy and Sufficiency of Christ”*.

Having set the direction for our journey, we now need to think about signposts that will help to keep us travelling in the right direction. These signposts are the points that we will want to make which will mark the stages in our journey and stop us wandering from the road. Every sermon needs a clear and logical plan of development and the signposts or headings for our points should help our hearers to follow that development. In writing a theme and aim sentence we have done a lot of work in thinking logically through the passage and hopefully some structure should begin to emerge.

Your headings should be clear and easy for your congregation to follow and remember.

Here is how this principle can be applied to the passage from Colossians that I mentioned above. This could have two main headings: “Jesus as Lord of creation” and “Jesus as Lord of the church”.

1. As Lord of creation we see Jesus:

- a) Firstly as the creator, the one who made all things.
- b) Secondly as the sustainer, the one who upholds the whole of creation.
- c) Thirdly as the goal, the one who will be glorified in the redeemed creation.

2) As Lord of the Church we see Jesus:

- a) Firstly, reigning as head of the Church.
- b) Secondly, as the risen Lord who is the source of our life.
- c) Thirdly, as the reconciler who makes peace between God and us through his death on the cross.

Having a clear sense of direction and signposts to keep us on track will stop us from getting side tracked in the sermon. It is unfortunately quite easy to go off at a tangent, and if we are not careful we can move right away from our Bible text completely and leave our hearers mystified about the meaning of the passage we are supposed to be preaching on.

This leads me on to a further point: Once you have started out on the journey from text to sermon it is vitally important that you stick to the road, that you do not get sidetracked. This is true in the work of preparation, but also whilst preaching. You must stick to the task in hand. The structure and presentation of the material will very much depend on your personality and style of preaching, but the following points will help you to move consistently through the passage, following its logic and uncovering its meaning:

- a) State the point in clear concise language.
- b) Show your hearers where you have found this idea in the text
- c) Explain what you mean by your point and why it is important for understanding the main idea of the text.
- d) Illustrate the point that you are making. This reinforces the point and gives breathing space for the hearer before you move on.
- e) Finally, apply the point to show how the idea should affect the way we live.

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## **Chapter 5 From text to sermon (2) – Illustrations**

Continuing the illustration of a journey for our sermons, we need to have points of interest. Most journeys are broken up by observing interesting features on the landscape, unusual occurrences on the road and new vistas. The use of illustrations in a sermon often serves this kind of purpose. Illustrations act as a change of pace and focus that will help the hearers in their understanding and concentration. The use of illustrations is a way of helping your hearers picture in their own minds the point you're making.

Here are a number of reasons why I think there is great value in using illustrations in the sermon:

They help to reinforce or clarify an explanation; they tell your hearer what the point is like in alternative language and ideas.

Then they arouse or capture interest and recall or refocus attention. Even the best speakers have to work hard at keeping their hearers' attention.

They allow the listener time to relax; they give him some breathing space in order to take on board the point that you have made, before moving on.

They allow an appeal to the emotions as well as to the mind. They can add warmth to the logic of the talk.

They recognise various learning styles and abilities in the congregation.

They reveal something of the speaker; his nature and experience. A personal experience will help your hearers relate to you and therefore to your words.

So they are very valuable parts of a sermon and should not be left out.

Illustrations are a means of painting pictures in words so that we illustrate a truth in a visual or evocative way. Taking the ministry of Jesus as an example, we have to recognise that his preaching and teaching was full of illustrations. The type of illustrations that Jesus used could be classified into groups:

Illustrations from scripture: Noah, Jonah, the Queen of Sheba for example.

Illustrations from the natural world: consider the birds, the wind blows where it wills etc.

Illustrations from common experiences of life. Many of the parables are based on everyday life: sowing and reaping, shepherds and sheep, parties and weddings, etc.

Illustrations from contemporary events: for example Luke 13:4 which speaks of the collapse of the Tower of Siloam.

From the example of Jesus we can begin to see that there are a variety of sources for illustrations. Jesus used illustrations widely in order to reinforce his teaching and we must do the same.

There are, however, some words of caution about illustrations:

It is important to ensure that the illustration is relevant: relevant firstly to the point that you are making but also relevant to the congregation, coming within their field of experience and understanding.

Illustrations must illustrate: The illustration must illustrate the point that you are making. It must not distract from the point, nor must it overshadow it. If the congregation remember the illustration but not the point that you have made then you have not achieved your goal. Nor must illustrations be used simply as a substitute for explaining the scripture. Give the explanation then illustrate. Avoid using a good story simply because it is a good story. Beware also of having too many illustrations. The use of one illustration after another to fill up the time falls into the trap of entertaining rather than seeking to illustrate the truth of God's Word.

Finally, use humour only where it clearly illustrates and helps to make the point. Once again do not fall into the trap of entertaining your congregation rather than teaching them God's Word, which is the solemn task that has been entrusted to us.

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### **Chapter 6 From text to sermon (3) – Introductions, conclusions and application**

You need to think carefully about the way we start our sermon. You need a good introduction that will capture the attention and interest of your hearers. I want you to imagine that your congregation is standing on the bank of a river and that you want to help them cross over to the other bank. The way that you are going to do this is to help them walk over stepping-stones laid in the river.

The first stone must be next to the bank where they are standing and the last stone must be at the point you want to take them to on the other bank. Your introduction is the first stepping-stone and you must start where your hearers are.

Here is a Biblical example of what I mean. Think about the visit Paul made to Athens and the way he preached the Gospel there (Acts 17:16-34). He saw a multitude of altars dedicated to the worship of the many different gods honoured, or feared, by the ancient Greeks. Paul even saw one dedicated to "the unknown God". He started his sermon by referring to that altar, it was something that his Greek audience knew about and could identify with. Try to

do a similar thing in the introductions to your sermons. A good introduction will be an approach road into the theme of your message, setting the scene for what is to come. It should encourage your congregation to listen; even persuading them it will be worth listening to. It can also enable your hearers to relax and to feel confident that you are someone they want to listen to.

We now move on to consider the last stepping-stone that will bring your congregation to your desired point of arrival. This last stepping-stone in your sermon will be your conclusion. As you have been teaching the Bible, point by point, throughout your message you may well have been making applications to your hearers of the lessons that you want them to retain and put into practice. However, if you were clear at the beginning of your sermon as to what your aim was in teaching this passage, as you conclude, you must apply the message to your hearers. Every congregation needs to be challenged to respond to the truth of God's Word. Preaching must instruct the mind, it can stir the emotions, but above all else it must move the will so the hearers respond in their life to what God is saying.

Here are some suggestions about how to apply God's Word in your conclusion.

Avoid making applications that are too general and not specific. Avoid applications that are repetitive. Ensure that

applications are relevant to the situation and needs of the congregation.

The following questions may help you to see how to apply any particular passage: What is there in this for the unbeliever? How will the discouraged hear and respond to this? Will this impact any young people who are present? What is there here for those who are struggling or who have failed?

If you have been making applications as you proceed through your message then you do not need to repeat them when you come to the conclusion of your sermon. You should think about the way that you will conclude your message. Above all, do not let it fade away weakly. Do not on the other hand drone on and on so that everyone is longing for you to end. From the main theme or thrust of your message you should see a final application to make; some response of action that you would expect your congregation to make. Do not try to re-preach the sermon in your conclusion. Do not introduce new ideas or illustrations. You should simply seek to gather up or summarise the main thrust of what God has been saying and the appropriate response that your hearers should make, so that your congregation leave with the big idea and how it affects their lives.

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### **Conclusion**

Besides all that has been written up to this point, there remains an essential ingredient to good sermon preparation – prayer. Pray for the work of the Holy Spirit. Pray for

your preparation, your delivery, and for your hearers. Ask God to move your heart with the truth of his Word and then move your hearers' hearts as well. Prayer cannot replace or be a substitute for all the hard work that sermon preparation involves. Equally however, preparing sermons without prayer means that something is likely to be missing. To be truly effective, as tools in God's hands, our sermons need both prayer and preparation.

If God, by his Spirit, illumines their minds with his truth so that they have heard him speak; if he stirs their emotions so that they are captivated by his Word, and if he moves their wills to respond to his voice; then he has graciously used us in our preaching to fulfil the purpose that he has called us to.

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