

Preparing to Preach

2. 'Them bones....them bones'

Let's begin by reminding ourselves of two foundational principles we need to bear in mind as we give ourselves to the task of expository preaching.

- a. Expository preaching is bringing out what God has said in his Word. It is not my using the Bible as a vehicle for saying what I want to say. We are talking about exposition, not imposition
- b. The correct meaning of any passage of Scripture is the meaning intended by the original author, not the meaning I want it to have.

If we are going to be serious about this task, and faithful to God's Word, we are going to need to spend time making sure we are really familiar with and correctly understand the text we are going to preach on, ever before we get down to serious sermon preparation as such. The more time we spend in the text and the harder we work at understanding it, the more we will be kept from imposing on a text our ideas or reading into a text what we want it to say.

Last time we looked at the first of the seven steps in Preparing to Preach, the stage I called, 'Feeling the Flesh', where we familiarise ourselves in every possible way with what is actually there. At that stage we are really asking ourselves the question –'what does God say in this passage of Scripture?'

Today we move to the next stage where we ask the question – 'how does God say what he says in this passage of Scripture?' and, following our analogy of the body, we move from considering the flesh of the text to the bones, the structure, the way the passage has been put together.

You see, if we are going to faithfully communicate the Word of God we need to know *how* God said what he said as much as *what* he said, because the 'how', the structure of the text, gives us a big clue as to the meaning of the text and, as we shall see next time, why God said what he said.

Remember, at this stage we are still concentrating on the text, the passage of Scripture, not on our sermon, and that's perhaps especially critical to bear in mind at this stage, so let me give you the golden rule of this second step in the process:

Find the structure – don't create it

Every passage of Scripture has a God-intended structure. The human authors of God's Word took care, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, not just with what they said but how they said it. The danger is that in our sermon preparation we want to rush ahead and devise our three points or some other structure; we want to focus on what we think is the driving force of this passage of Scripture or, as we shall see next time, the heartbeat of the text, and that increases the possibility that we will actually distort the true meaning of the passage we are preaching from or put the emphasis in the wrong place.

The bones of the text are what give that particular piece of biblical flesh its distinctive and unique shape, and God wanted it to look like that, so we had better make sure we reflect that in our preaching.

There are three things we need to do

- i. identify the bones
- ii. separate the bones
- iii. assemble the bones

i. Identifying the bones

There are two sets of clues in any passage that will help us to find the bones, the structure that gives the text shape;

a. grammatical clues

These are usually small words or even parts of words that are hugely influential on the meaning and structure of a passage. It's easy to skip over these words and focus on the meatier, perhaps more 'spiritual' words, but very often the very emphasis and message of the author depends on these words. What they do in effect, is act as markers to draw our attention to the bones, to the points being made by the author

There is a sizeable list of words and phrases that we need to constantly look out for in this regard:

e.g. for, because, since, as, in order that, so that, therefore, according to, just as

When you see these words, don't skip over them, they might well be vital cues to the central meaning and purpose of the text – linking the bones together and giving shape and structure to the passage

Let's look at an example in Ephesians 6, in the section beginning at v10. Notice that when Paul gives us the command to "Put on the whole armour of God" (v11) he doesn't simply tell us to do it, he tells us why – "*that* you may be able to stand" (v11) and "*for* we do not wrestle against flesh and blood" (v12). The reasons for doing something strengthen the point being made.

Here's another example, in Ezra 7v10; just in this one verse. "For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel". If we identify the grammatical clues, the words that influence and shape the meaning of the verse, we will note *for, to, of, and, to, and, to, and*. These will have become clearer after we have become really familiar with the text, using the steps outlined in our last session, because as we catch the rhythm of the verse we will be struck by the repetition of the *ands* and the *tos* and see the shape they give the verse as a whole.

b. content clues

Sometimes the author doesn't link his textual bones with small, important words but does so by the way he pieces the content together. Sometimes he will use repetition, sometimes he will clearly change tack or subject and you can immediately see a different bone emerging as a feature of the structure.

Again, looking at Ephesians 6 we can see an example of that. Paul begins v10 with the word 'finally' and moves into what is clearly a new focus of thought from what he was dealing with up to that point.

Here's an important and, I hope, helpful point. Not only do individual passages of Scripture have structure and bones, so do whole books of the Bible and, if we are preaching through a book of the Bible, we need to take time to find the bones and structure or we may end up imposing our ideas and emphases on our teaching rather than exposing God's.

Let me share two personal discoveries with you, one of which Dominic Smart alluded to a couple of months ago and which I found personally encouraging because I had begun to become aware of it myself.

How would we divide up the Book of Acts if we were going to preach through it? Well there are a number of ways but there are some clear hints within the book itself as to how we should approach it. For example, there appears to be a definite structuring of the events in Acts around a series of progress reports, highlighting the growth and spread of the church. You will find these in 6v7; 9v31; 12v24; 16v5; 28vv30-31.

More recently, I made a fresh discovery in Genesis that I don't remember really seeing before. I am teaching the early chapters of Genesis at College at the moment and discovered the often repeated phrase – "the generations of...." or "the book of the generations of...."; a phrase which occurs 11 times in the 50 chapters of the book. You can find them in 2v4; 5v1; 6v9; 10v1; 11v10; 11v27; 25v12; 25v19; 6v1; 36v9; 37v2.

So there are, if you like, what you might call both *content* bones within the passage and *context* bones to be aware of.

Having identified the bones, we then need to separate them

ii. Separating the bones

Part of the reason for giving the passage a structure is so that we place the emphasis where it should be and not where we want it to be. We must be very wary in our preaching of majoring on a minor point or not paying enough attention to the major point. I well recall one of my closest Sudanese pastor friends preaching to his congregation on the text from Matthew 26v40 "So, could you not watch with me one hour?" and berating his hearers because they couldn't or wouldn't pray for one hour at a time. Surely not what Jesus was really trying to convey to his weary disciples. That's to make a big point out of a small bone.

To guard us from majoring on the minors we need to distinguish between the big bones and the little bones, the major structural points and the smaller, less significant ones. Let me jump ahead to the issue of sermon outlines to illustrate what I mean. Most well ordered and structured sermons will have an outline, consisting of perhaps two or three points. And when we get to that stage in our series I will be strongly advocating that as vital for good sermon preparation and effective hearing on the part of our listeners. But very often, the points we have will also have some sub-points which explain and fill out the main points.

So it is with the biblical text. There are the big bones – the main things the writer is trying to convey - and the small bones, the subsidiary points that back up or amplify his main point.

For example, from the sample list of words I gave you earlier, the word *because* is almost always more likely to be more significant than perhaps *from* or *to* or *and*. *Because* probably indicates a reason and the other words help fill out what is being explained.

Let's look again at Ezra 7v10 and see if we can distinguish between the big bones and the small ones. Probably key to a right understanding of the structure of this verse is the word *to*, used here three times to speak of a purpose. They are linked by two occurrences of the word *and*, but *and* is also used again in a slightly different way to link the two items that are really subsidiary points of the third purpose statement.

From this, I would take the three things Ezra determined to do as the big bones and the two small bones are the 'unpacking' of the third big bone, the teaching of God's law in Israel.

So far we have identified the bones, separated the bones and now we need to assemble them.

iii. **Assembling the bones**

Now we need to assemble the bones so that we can easily see the structure and shape of the text and do so in such a way that clearly gives weight to the big bones, because this is going to be the guide for our sermon preparation and the outline or the sermon itself.

Let's look again at Ezra 7v10 and see what the results of our analysis might look like.

For Ezra had set his heart

- a. to study the Law of the Lord
and
- b. to do it
and
- c. to teach
 - i. his statutes
and
 - ii. rules

in Israel

Now as I look at that verse, I can clearly see that there are three big bones, marked a, b and c, and two smaller bones, marked i. and ii. And, remembering the golden rule of this stage of the process, I didn't create this structure; I found it in the text. So, when I finally come to do my sermon preparation, I will use this textual structure to shape my sermon and outline

Let's look again at our series passage, Paul's great prayer in Ephesians 3, and bring these two processes to bear on it.

- a. Identifying the bones
Here's the text of the passage and I have marked out what I see to be the grammatical and content clues that show me where the various bones are.

"For this reason I bow my knee before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen"

Comment [j1]: context clue linking back to the previous passage

Comment [j2]: qualifying phrase

Comment [j3]: 'purpose' word

Comment [j4]: qualifying phrase

Comment [j5]: 'purpose' phrase

Comment [j6]: 'purpose' word

Comment [j7]: 'result' phrase

Comment [j8]: qualifying phrase

Comment [j9]: qualifying phrase

Comment [j10]: 'purpose' word

b. Separating and Assembling the bones

Now let me set the bones out according to what I see to be the given emphasis and the difference between the big and small bones

For this reason

I bow my knee before the Father,

- i. from whom every family in heaven and earth is named,
that
- ii. according to the riches of his glory
- a. he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,
so that
- b. Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith –
that
- c. you, being rooted and grounded in love,
- d. may have strength to comprehend
 - iii. with all the saints
 - iv. what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and
- e. to know the love of Christ
 - v. that surpasses knowledge,
that
- f. you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen”