

High-Altitude Spiral Preaching: A Philosophy and Methodology for Preaching from a Whole Book of the Bible in One Sermon as Part of a Long-Range Plan

by Kerry McGonigal¹

There has been a resurgence of expository preaching in the twenty-first-century conservative-evangelical world,² and the church has benefited greatly from this recovery. This return to expository preaching typically expresses itself in verse-by-verse, paragraph-by-paragraph exposition, most often working sequentially through a book of the Bible.³ Though there are good reasons for preaching smaller textual units, preachers who limit themselves to bite-sized units are missing out on the many benefits of big-picture preaching, or what I am calling “high-altitude preaching.” This kind of preaching broadens out the borders of the preaching text, taking in an entire book, a collection of books, and even the whole Bible.⁴

Table 1. The Spectrum of Expository Preaching

Microscopic			Macroscopic
Ground Level: Clauses, Verses, and Paragraphs	Low Altitude: Chapters and Sections	High Altitude: Entire Books and Entire Bible	

In some cases, the lack of a balanced diet⁵ from the pulpit stems from a lack of instruction in our Bible schools and seminaries. Coupled with that is the lack of sufficient modeling in this area.

¹ Kerry McGonigal (DMin) has been teaching expository preaching at Bob Jones University for over twenty years. He also has over a decade of experience in pastoral ministry. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Bible Faculty Summit held on the BJU campus in July of 2025.

² Consider the number of books published on expository preaching in the last decade or so: Haddon W. Robinson, Scott Wenig, and Torrey Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025); David R. Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014); David Strain, *Expository Preaching* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2021); Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix, *Power in the Pulpit: How to Prepare and Deliver Expository Sermons* (Chicago: Moody, 2017).

³ Even those who preach through whole books of the Bible often do so with their heads down, focusing more on the details of individual paragraphs than on what comes before and after and how the parts work together and relate to the whole book. The opposite problem is typified by those who use the text as a springboard into the vast landscape of the Bible, usually in an effort to make biblical-theological connections and preach Christ. Both approaches are lacking.

⁴ Mark Dever preached a message covering the entire Bible entitled “The Whole Bible: What Does God Want of Us?” See *The Message of the Old Testament: Promises Made* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 23-46.

⁵ Pastors should provide a balanced diet of high-altitude, low-altitude, and ground-level preaching. I am not arguing for the *priority* of high-altitude preaching in pulpit ministry. The ratio I would recommend *as a general rule* is high altitude

Beginning preachers who have not been taught how to preach from a larger textual unit and who do not see it done on a regular basis will default to the emphasis of their theological education and the example of their ministerial mentors.

A connected problem comes with a lack of teaching on how to plan out a preaching calendar. The few resources devoted to this topic focus on a one-year approach not a long-range approach.⁶ Unless a pastor has a background in educational theory and practice, he may not understand the need for laying out a preaching curriculum that includes both scope and sequence.⁷ This lack of planning results in preaching that defaults to the next verse or paragraph and fails to consider how to lay out a preaching plan that includes a healthy mix of ground-level, low-altitude, and high-altitude sermons.⁸

In this paper I am arguing that *pastors should have a long-range plan for their preaching that incorporates high-altitude preaching from whole books of the Bible in a spiral approach, circling back to these books regularly and expositing them from different angles and with increasing depth and complexity. This is what I am calling high-altitude spiral preaching (HASP).*⁹ This paper is a call for preachers to expand the scope of their texts from microscopic to macroscopic and give careful thought to the scope and sequence of their preaching calendar. I will both argue for this approach and model what it could look like, using Genesis as an example throughout.

Philosophy of HASP

High-Altitude Preaching

Description of High-Altitude Preaching

High-altitude preaching (HAP) is preaching at the book level and above. It can be thought of in terms of three analogies.¹⁰ First, HAP is a 10,000-foot helicopter, high-level overview of the entire

(20%), low altitude (30%), and ground level (50%). There are also different kinds of sermons based on purpose, not length of text, but that is not my focus here. For example, Donald Hamilton describes “four distinct kinds of sermons: evangelistic preaching, edificational preaching, pastoral preaching, and prophetic preaching.” *Preaching with Balance: Achieving and Maintaining Biblical Priorities in Preaching* (Geanies House, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 206. That said, in planning out the preaching calendar with the church in view, there is more to think about than simply how big the textual unit is.

⁶ For example, Stephen Nelson Rummage writes of his book *Planning Your Preaching*, “The purpose of this book is to help pastors put together a *quarterly, six-month, or yearly* schedule for what they will preach.” *Planning Your Preaching: A Step-by-Step Guide for Developing a One-Year Preaching Calendar* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2002), 14 (emphasis added).

⁷ Scope and sequence in the context of a preaching calendar would deal with (1) what content the preacher plans to cover (and by extension not cover) and (2) the order in which he plans to cover it. See James Estep, Michael Anthony, and Gregg Allison, *A Theology for Christian Education* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 284.

⁸ Scott Gibson argues that “preachers do plan” but “the conversation in a preacher’s head may go something like this: *I’ve preached through a number of books from the Old and New Testaments but I’ve never preached through Numbers before. My goal has been to preach through all the books of the Bible before I retire. Yes, that’s it. I’ll preach through Numbers.*” *Preaching with a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 67.

⁹ I am not going to deal with low-altitude preaching (chapters and sections).

¹⁰ See Jonathan Leeman and Mark Dever, “On Overview Sermons,” *Pastors Talk*, episode 165, March 30, 2021, <https://www.9marks.org/episode/episode-165-on-overview-sermons/>; Mark Dever, *Message of the Old Testament*, 17–20.

biblical book. Think of the contours of a landscape seen from a high altitude where you can see the lay of the land and all of its major features. It is preaching where, for example, all fifty chapters of Genesis are in view. Second, HAP can be compared to an archaeological dig designed to provide an initial survey of the site. There is the initial sweep of the area to map out major features. Then the archaeologist begins to dig in and excavate the various layers. Third, HAP can be likened to creating a map before going on a journey. The preacher zooms out to consider the whole trip, looking at distance and time, and considering key destination points along the way.

Basis of High-Altitude Preaching

The Bible admonishes preachers to preach the Word (2 Tim 4:2), but it does not specify the exact form that preaching is to take. The fundamental non-negotiable for biblical preaching is faithfulness to what God has revealed in his Word. Though there are many convincing reasons to engage in ground-level exposition on a weekly basis,¹¹ and the history of the church is replete with examples and exemplars, the Bible allows for liberty when it comes to particular methods and forms of exposition.

Though there are no examples in the Bible of someone preaching a whole-book sermon, there are examples of high-altitude preaching. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 runs all the way from the prophet Joel to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Stephen's sermon in Acts 7, the longest in the book, gives a big-picture summary of Israel's history from Abraham to Solomon. Most notably, Jesus himself engages in high-altitude preaching in Luke 24, where "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (v. 27). Clearly, he engaged in the exposition of biblical texts at the ground-level, but it was highly selective engagement and part of his high-altitude fly-over of the OT. This is HAP at its best. It corrected the disciples' missing piece of the big story. It was not just that they were missing a text. They were missing a theme (suffering) that was found in many texts spanning the whole OT. But they did not see it. This was robust, highly-selective, text-grounded, high-altitude preaching of a biblical-theological theme throughout the OT.

Classification of High-Altitude Preaching

Where does HAP fall in the spectrum of preaching types? Historically and morphologically, sermons have been classified as expository, textual, and topical.¹² An expository sermon is one in which

¹¹ In answering the question, "Why are you compelled to preach verse by verse through books of the Bible, unlike other notable preachers such as C.H. Spurgeon?" John MacArthur replied, "Preaching verse by verse through books of the Bible is the most reasonable way to teach the whole counsel of God. If I am obligated to teach the whole new covenant message and all of the mystery unfolded, the only systematic way that I know to teach it all is to take it the way it comes, one book at a time from beginning to end. If I were to approach the goal of teaching the whole New Testament in random fashion, it would be a hopeless maze to lead people through. On the other hand, if I am committed to teaching the Word of God systematically so that all of the revelation of God is brought before His people, the only reasonable way of doing that is to go through it one book at a time. "Frequently Asked Questions about Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 341.

¹² In his classic work on preaching, John Broadus discusses these three "species of sermons": (1) subject-sermons (topical), (2) text-sermons (textual), and (3) expository sermons. *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermon*, ed. Edwin Charles Dargan, new (23rd) ed. (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1898), 306–338. For the three types of

the sermon's main points and subpoints come from one text. A textual sermon is one in which the main points are derived from one text, usually a verse of unique character, and the subpoints are derived from passages outside that text and its book. A topical sermon consists of two or more passages, often from different books, that are connected by a shared topic. The degree to which the preacher determines the organization differs based on the type. For an expository sermon, the organization is mostly determined by the text itself. For a textual sermon, the text determines the main points, but the preacher must decide where else to go in Scripture for their development. For a topical sermon, the preacher controls the organization and text selection from beginning to end.

Table 2. Types of Sermons

Sermon Type	Main Points Derived From	Subpoints Derived From	Organization Determined By
Expository	One text	The same text	Mostly the text itself
Textual	One text (usually a unique verse)	Passages outside the main text and its book	Text for main points; preacher for subpoint development
Topical	The preacher's synthesis of two or more passages (often from different books)	The preacher's choice of supporting texts	The preacher (from beginning to end)

With this classification in view, HAP can fit legitimately into each of the three types. Expository HAP is concerned to say what the Bible book says in the way it says it, just as expository preachers do when they handle a paragraph from Ephesians. For HAP, however, there will be a greater degree of selectivity in coverage, since the textual unit is typically too large to cover comprehensively in one sermon. That means the preacher exercises more influence in the book's re-presentation, but he is nevertheless bent on faithfully bringing out the argument of the book and its development throughout.

Textual HAP would look like taking a key verse from a book and using it as the organizational basis for the sermon. For example, texts such as Genesis 3:15 or 50:20 could be used as the organizational basis for a fly-over book sermon on Genesis. The text chosen becomes the lens through which the book is understood and developed.

Topical HAP is preaching from a book where a major topic or theme is traced throughout. In this kind of sermon, the preacher determines the topic and the texts from the book that will be highlighted and dealt with. The preacher also determines the organizational development of the theme.¹³

definitions of expository preaching, see Harold T. Bryson, *Expository Preaching: The Art of Preaching Through a Book of the Bible* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 11–41.

¹³ The topical approach sounds very much preacher-driven, and it can be, but ideally the themes and texts dealt with in this category of sermon will be significant themes that surfaced by means of exegetical and theological study. This is to be contrasted with a preacher who cherry picks certain ideas or texts to say what he wants to say.

Of course, as with any classification scheme, there is going to be overlap, making some high-altitude sermons difficult to categorize.¹⁴ An attempt is made in the next section to tease out some of the many kinds of HAP available to the preacher.

Table 3. Basic Types of High-Altitude Sermons

HAP Type	Main Points Derived From	Subpoints Derived From	Organization Determined By
Expository	The main points of the book	The preacher's choice of relevant texts within the book	The emphasis and flow of the biblical book
Textual	A key verse from the book	The preacher's choice of relevant texts within the book	The biblical text for main points; the preacher for subpoint development
Topical	The preacher's synthesis of the book's teaching on the topic or theme	The preacher's choice of relevant texts within the book	The preacher (from beginning to end)

Models of High-Altitude Preaching

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to the high-altitude sermon. Each variation represents different accents on and combinations of four key interrogatives: what, who, why, and how.

The “what” question relates to the book’s content and argument. A what-type high-altitude sermon will focus on the message and theology of the book. It has a doctrinal orientation that either brings out the message of the book as a whole or traces one or more theological themes through the book.

The “who” question relates to the people involved—the author and his target audience. A who-type high-altitude sermon is going to focus on the relational dynamics of the book and rhetorical concerns. Connected to the “who” question and subsumed under it are the “when” and “where” questions. When and where did the author and his audience live (historical context)? What occasion prompts the author to say what he does in the way he does?¹⁵

Closely related, but with a slightly different accent, the “why” question highlights the author’s purpose for writing. It builds on the people and occasion to zero in on the author’s intentions and his objectives for writing. A why-type sermon can emphasize the application to the original audience (with

¹⁴ For example, a topical high-altitude sermon, if tapping into the key theme or message of the book, might resemble more of an expository sermon that essentially says what the text says in the way it says it.

¹⁵ For more on the rhetorical analysis of a book of the Bible, see my dissertation: “A Philosophy and Methodology for Preaching an Expository Book Series Governed by Apostolic Purpose and Based on Rhetorical Analysis: A Case Study of 1 Peter” (DMin diss., Bob Jones University, 2014).

the stress on the why of the human author) or it can emphasize the application to the modern-day audience (with the stress on the why of the Holy Spirit).

The “how” question relates to the structure of the book. How did the author organize the book to convey the “what” (message) and accomplish the “why” (purpose). A how-type sermon is going to be concerned to expose the skeletal structure of the book and help the audience understand how the book is put together. As with the classification of sermons, there is often overlap among these approaches which makes categorization difficult.

Table 4. Interrogative Categories of High-Altitude Sermons

Interrogative	Focus	Description
What	Content and Argument	Focuses on the message and theology, with a doctrinal orientation. Can highlight the book's overall message or trace theological themes.
Who	People Involved (Author, Audience)	Focuses on relational dynamics and rhetorical concerns. Includes "where" and "when" (historical context, occasion).
Why	Author's Purpose	Builds on the people and occasion to emphasize the author's intentions and objectives. Can stress application to original audience (human author's why) or modern audience (Holy Spirit's why).
How	Structure of the Book	Focuses on how the author organized the book to convey the message ("what") and accomplish the purpose ("why").

High-Altitude Multi-Dimensional Book Sermons

The high-altitude multi-dimensional sermon is a blended approach designed to bring together the what, who, why, and how.

The book-introduction sermon. This type of sermon tries to address each of the key interrogatives with relatively equal weight.

- Who is writing to whom and why? (who and why)
- What are the main divisions of the book? (how)
- What is the main message of the book? (what)

This approach is the most common way of introducing a book, especially as a kick-off sermon to an expository book series. It gives people a good orientation to the main contours and key landmarks in the book.

The expository book sermon. “Expository” here means that the point of the text is the point of the sermon.¹⁶ Some would add textual conformity¹⁷ and purpose alignment.¹⁸ Putting it all together, the expository book sermon is intent on preaching the central argument of the book (the what) in the way the book develops the argument (the how) and to accomplish (as much as possible in view of our contemporary audience) the purpose of the book (the why). Therefore, the sermon’s argument, progression, and application is (as much as possible¹⁹) a mirror of the book’s argument, progression, and application. In sum, the sermon’s structure and argument and purpose is shaped by the structure, argument, and purpose of the book. Effort is made to show how the sections of the book connect to each other and work together to convey the author’s overarching message and purpose. In this sense, it differs from the book introduction sermon because the book introduction sermon is more concerned to answer the various questions and less concerned to let everything surface progressively as the book itself brings it up.

Simply put, the expository book sermon (alternatively called an overview sermon²⁰) is essentially an expanded version of the classic paragraph approach to exposition. But the text window is much wider. Messages like this often fail because they try to accomplish too much. They easily end up being information-heavy and coming across as a lecture more than a sermon. Preachers must have a clear focus and be vigilant in their selectivity.

Each of the following varieties of HAP tends to emphasize or accent one of the key interrogatives: who, what, why, and how.

High-Altitude “Who” Book Sermons

The biographical book sermon. A biographical sermon highlights the people or character development in the book. For example, a sermon of this kind from Genesis might focus on the key

¹⁶ “Expositional preaching is preaching in which the main point of the biblical text being considered becomes the main point of the sermon being preached.” Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 36.

¹⁷ David Helm argues for “textual conformity” as part of his definition of expository preaching: “We don’t superimpose our outline over the text. Rather, we bring out of the text what the Holy Spirit already put in. And that is best done in the manner in which he put it together. . . . I have defined biblical exposition as empowered preaching that rightly submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of a biblical text. . . . By *shape* and *emphasis* I mean that every natural preaching unit in the Bible comes ready-made with a Spirit-intended organization and emphasis. The job of the preacher is to find it. That is best done through the disciplined work of exegesis and theological reflection. Once that shape and emphasis are clearly apprehended, the preacher is ready to think about sermon construction.” *Expositional Preaching*, 101.

¹⁸ Again, Helm writes, “A faithful preacher starts the sermon preparation process by paying attention to a biblical text’s original audience and a text’s purposes for those readers.” *Ibid.*, 39. And Haddon Robinson: “How then do you determine the purpose of your sermon? You do so by discovering the purpose behind the passage you are preaching. As part of your exegesis, you should ask, ‘Why did the author write this? What effect did he expect it to have on his readers?’” *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 108.

¹⁹ “An expositor must give special attention not only to what modern men and women have in common with those who received the original revelation but also to the differences between them.” *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁰ Leeman and Dever, “On Overview Sermons.”

players as they relate to the major movements of the plot: Adam and Eve (from Creation to Fall), Noah, Abraham (from childless to father of multitude), Isaac, Jacob (from deceiver to Israel), and Joseph (favored son to slave to ruler). The accent is on God's work through these individuals to accomplish his purposes. But the sermon would also put the spotlight on their failures, transformation, and growth.

A biographical sermon could also highlight one major character such as Abraham. This would still be a book sermon in that the focus is on the part Abraham plays within the message and purpose of the entire book. This is different from excerpting a slice out of Abraham's life and doubling down on that one segment (e.g., the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–9) or even preaching on the life of Abraham (Genesis 12–25).

The historical-contextual or rhetorical book sermon. Another form of the “who” book sermon is the historical-contextual or rhetorical book sermon. This approach is concerned primarily with the background and setting to the book and the relational and rhetorical dynamics driving the book's content and organization.²¹

The accent is on the author and his original audience. That is the “who” part. But exploring the relationships is not an end in and of itself. A sermon of this type focuses on the people part in order to bring out the purpose part. So it is also a “why”-type book sermon as well. What was the author's objective in writing what he did to this group of people living at this time and place in light of their unique circumstances? Any accent on the content or message part of the book is done primarily from the standpoint of the original recipients. How was this message heard and received by the original audience?

In the case of Genesis, the focus would be on Moses as the author writing to the Israelites during the wilderness period. The Israelites have left Egypt, and they need to understand their origins and why God chose them as his people; they need reinforcement on their identity and relationship to Yahweh.²²

High-Altitude “What” Book Sermons

There is a kind of book sermon that focuses on the doctrine or theology of the book. These sermons tend to prioritize either biblical theology or systematic theology.

The whole-book biblical-theological book sermon. Some understand biblical theology to consist of tracing a theological theme through a book of the Bible.²³ A book sermon like this from Genesis might

²¹ The rhetorical situation of a biblical book refers to the interplay between three key components that shaped why and how the book was written. (1) The problem: Every biblical book addresses some specific problem, need, or situation that called for a response. This is often the most important element to identify. (2) The audience: The people who were most directly affected by the problem (their circumstances, culture, and needs shaped how the author approached the issue). (3) The writer: The author's background, authority, and relationship to both the problem and audience influenced his rhetorical strategy. This framework helps the preacher understand not just what a biblical author said, but why he said it and how he structured his message to address his specific audience's needs.

²² These kinds of messages can be challenging to preach if the original situation is not explicitly revealed or clear.

²³ Though Naselli takes a whole-Bible approach to biblical theology, he writes, “You can do biblical theology in many different ways. You can focus on a single book, such as righteousness in Romans or wisdom in 1 Corinthians. Or you can

pick up on the theme of God's providence and pull that thread all the way through from Creation to specific examples in the lives of Abraham and Isaac (e.g., God's provision of a sacrificial lamb as Jehovah Jireh), culminating in the story of Joseph and Genesis 50:20.

The whole-Testament biblical-theological book sermon. A biblical-theological approach that takes in the whole OT or NT expands the parameters beyond one book. However, in order to be classified as a book sermon, the book needs to be the primary focus and driving force of the message, not just a quick springboard into a larger theological exploration.²⁴ For example, the theme of providence could be established from Genesis, and based on the particular argument of Genesis related to God's providence, it could be shown to be extended out and developed throughout the rest of the OT.²⁵

The whole-Bible biblical-theological book sermon. Another perspective on biblical theology sees it as a whole-Bible enterprise. Andy Naselli defines biblical theology as "a way of analyzing and synthesizing the Bible that makes organic, salvation-historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, especially regarding how the Old and New Testaments integrate and climax in Christ."²⁶

Metanarrative approach. One type of biblical-theological book sermon examines the book in light of the entire story of Scripture. A sermon like this might be concerned with how the book reveals or points to Christ through its various themes, types, and prophecies.²⁷ But the focus is on how the book fits into and contributes to the overarching story of God's redemption culminating in Christ. The metanarrative sermon is concerned to explain where the book fits into the plot of the story.

For example, a sermon of this type could look at Genesis from the standpoint of the Abrahamic Covenant and then extend out of Genesis to explore its connection to the Bible storyline and its fulfillment in Christ. Again, to be a whole-book sermon the focus cannot be chapters 12, 15, 17, and 22 alone. Chapters 1–11 would be addressed as the setting and background to the covenant, and chapters following Abraham's life and death would be brought in as the continuation of the story, a story that will then spill over the borders of Genesis and into the landscape of the whole Bible. The issue is one of proportion and emphasis. In this example, chapters 1–11 could be dealt with very quickly in view of the sermon's primary objective. But they are not overlooked.

focus on a corpus, that is, the collected writings by a single author, such as love in John's writings (the Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and Revelation) or faith in Paul's thirteen letters. Even a casual Bible reader notices that John says things differently from Paul or Peter. Their emphases differ from and complement one another. Or you can focus on one of the Testaments, such as kingdom in the New Testament. If you focus almost exclusively on just one Testament, then that's called Old Testament theology or New Testament theology. Those are subsets of whole-Bible biblical theology." Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2017), 233.

²⁴ At what point does a book sermon like this turn into a topical sermon? There is no set ratio, but either the book of Genesis will be seen as one stop among many along the way, or it will be clear that it is the foundation for the theme's further development.

²⁵ "The story of the Old Testament is nothing if not a story of divine providence." Kevin DeYoung, "The Old Testament Is a Story of Providence." The Gospel Coalition, April 24, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-old-testament-is-a-story-of-providence/>.

²⁶ Naselli, 231

²⁷ In a sermon like this, Genesis might get 50% of the time and the metanarrative 50%. In a whole-book-type sermon (like the overview sermon), it might be Genesis 90% and the metanarrative 10%.

Thematic approach. Another type of whole-Bible book sermon traces out one or more key biblical-theological themes (e.g., God’s glory, Creation, sin, covenant, temple, wisdom, holiness, the gospel, etc.) throughout the book and then, based on that book’s treatment of the theme, ties it into the Bible’s progressive development of that theme. It is like pulling the threads all the way through. David Helm refers to the central thread as the “melodic line.” It is the “essence of what the book is about.”²⁸ Often the book’s melodic line will serve as a solid basis for both the metanarrative and thematic approach.

A number of images are associated with redemption in Genesis (e.g., coverings provided in Eden, the ark as a picture of salvation from judgment, etc.). The sermon could stay in one lane and focus on one major theme or subtheme in Genesis, or it could resemble a multi-lane highway with on and off ramps, showing how multiple themes intersect and where they end up. A Genesis sermon could show how God’s sovereignty in Creation and history intersects with the Fall and its consequences. Or the sermon could relate God’s covenant promises and blessings with the themes of faith and obedience. The combinations are many.²⁹

The systematic-theological book sermon. The systematic-theological book sermon highlights and develops key pre-determined systematic-theological categories in a book: Theology Proper, Bibliology, Angelology, Anthropology, Hamartiology, Christology, Soteriology, Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology. This kind of sermon is concerned with answering two questions: (1) What does this whole book teach us about a certain topic, and (2) How does that cohere with the rest of the Bible’s teaching on this topic?

Genesis is particularly well-suited for this approach, since it is the book of beginnings and sets the stage theologically for the rest of the Bible. In Genesis a preacher could focus on the doctrines of Creation, sin, redemption, providence, and the people of God, relating each to the appropriate theological category and its concerns and questions. Whereas a biblical-theological approach would put more emphasis on the theme’s progression throughout the book, a systematic-theological approach will organize the topic in a more logical and conventional way, with more emphasis on the doctrine than on its development. In order to preach this kind of message and it still be a book sermon, there would have to be enough material on the topic throughout the book to examine it from a whole-book standpoint and develop it with subpoints drawn from the book.

The textual book sermon. Another high-altitude “what” sermon is the textual book sermon. In this model a key text is used as the organizational basis for the sermon’s development. For example, Genesis 3:15 could serve as the key text for a Genesis book sermon.

²⁸ Helm, 47. Helm gives these strategies for finding the melodic line of a book: “reading the book from *cover to cover*, reading and rereading the *beginning and end*, looking for important *repeated words, concepts, and phrases*, and hunting down *purpose statements*” (48).

²⁹ In addition to identifying key themes through personal engagement with the book, most good commentaries have an introduction section that addresses key theological themes in a book. For example, in a section entitled “Theology of Genesis,” K. A. Mathews identifies six theological themes: patriarchal promises, God and his world, human life, sin, civilization, and covenant. *Genesis 1–11:26: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 54–63.

- I. The Serpent's Strategy and the Conflict
- II. The Woman's Seed and the Promise
- III. The Seed's Suffering and His Victory

High-Altitude "Why" Book Sermons

A book sermon with an accent on the "why" question is either going to highlight the human author's intention and purpose for writing to his audience or the divine author's intention and purpose for including this book in the Bible and for today's audience. Of course, these two approaches can be combined in various proportions.

The original-audience book sermon. A Genesis book sermon of this type would emphasize Moses' intention for including and emphasizing what he does in the book (and in the Pentateuch as a whole) in light of the situation of the original recipients. There is overlap here with the historical-contextual or rhetorical book sermon described earlier. However, the particular press of a sermon of this kind is not as much on historical background and author-recipient relationship but on the effect the book was intended to have on those who first received it. Indicators of purpose will be found directly or indirectly in the text itself and suggested by the overarching message of the book.

The modern-audience book sermon. A Genesis book sermon of this type will highlight the applicational value and impact of the book on today's readers. For example, tracing the narrative of Creation, Fall, and redemption in Genesis could serve as a model for a biblical worldview. The sermon would flesh out specific applications where the framework seen in Genesis could help believers interpret the world around them. Regardless of the particular approach and how much of the original situation is brought into the sermon, the stress lands on the book's relevance for the modern-day reader. It is more contemporary than historical in its proportions.

High-Altitude "How" Book Sermons

Lastly, there are book sermons that emphasize the organization or genre of the book. The concern is to bring out the way in which the author said what he did.

The book-outline sermon. The book-outline sermon will help the listeners understand the way in which the author structured the book to get across his message and accomplish his purpose. They will walk away with a clear sense of the book's outline. The main divisions and their relationship to one another are of primary concern. For Genesis, a book outline sermon would zero in on chapters 1–11 and 12–50 and their relationship. Further divisions might be brought in depending on the sermon's length and purpose and in light of the simplicity or complexity of the book's organization.

The genre-sensitive sermon. A book sermon of this kind would approach the message based on the book's dominant genre. For instance, if there are three primary text types in the Bible—narrative, discourse, and poetry³⁰—then a book sermon of this kind would bring out the unique features and

³⁰ Helm writes (54), "The Bible has different genres: Old Testament Narrative, Prophetic, Apocalyptic, Wisdom and Poetry, Epistles, Gospels, and Acts. Within those different genres, you have three basic text types: discourse, narrative, and poetry. As a general rule, you won't discover the structure of a psalm (poetry) using the same reading strategies you would

impact of the primary text type.³¹ The narrative book sermon would emphasize the book's plot structure, characterization, and dialogue. The discourse book sermon would emphasize the book's argument and its development. The poetry book sermon might highlight major recurring themes.

Table 5. Taxonomy of High-Altitude Sermons

Sermon Type	Focus
High-Altitude Multi-Dimensional Book Sermons	Blended approach (what, who, why, how)
<i>Book Introduction Sermon</i>	Introduces main divisions, message, and purpose (author/audience)
<i>Expository Book Sermon</i>	Preaches central argument of the book (in submission to book's how and why)
High-Altitude "Who" Book Sermons	Emphasizes people/context
<i>Biographical Book Sermon</i>	Highlights people/character development in the book
<i>Historical-Contextual or Rhetorical Book Sermon</i>	Focuses on background, setting, and relational/rhetorical dynamics
High-Altitude "What" Book Sermons	Emphasizes doctrine/theology or key text
<i>Whole-Book Biblical-Theological Book Sermon</i>	Traces a theological theme through one book
<i>Whole-Testament Biblical-Theological Book Sermon</i>	Extends a theme from one book through the whole OT or NT
<i>Whole-Bible Biblical-Theological Book Sermon</i>	Examines the book in light of the entire story of Scripture (metanarrative or thematic)
<i>Systematic-Theological Book Sermon</i>	Develops key systematic-theological categories in a book
<i>Textual Book Sermon</i>	Uses a key text from the book as the organizational basis for the sermon
High-Altitude "Why" Book Sermons	Emphasizes author's intention or modern audience relevance
<i>Original-Audience Book Sermon</i>	Stresses author's intention for the original recipients
<i>Modern-Audience Book Sermon</i>	Highlights the applicational value and impact for today's readers.
High-Altitude "How" Book Sermons	Emphasizes organization or genre
<i>Book Outline Sermon</i>	Helps listeners understand the book's structure and main divisions
<i>Genre-Sensitive Sermon</i>	Approaches the message based on the book's dominant text type (narrative, discourse, poetry)

Benefits of High-Altitude Preaching

Preachers are clearly not limited to ground-level preaching. When it comes to alternatives, there are many high-altitude alternatives with a number of important benefits.

employ in a Gospel (most likely narrative or discourse). Knowing how each of the different text types works will help you to know which tools best unlock them."

³¹ See Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-Create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2007).

Perspective

HAP allows the listeners to see the whole landscape of a biblical book at a glance. It gives them a big-picture perspective, like stopping at an overlook area to take in a panoramic view of a beautiful landscape. People need to have a sense of the magnitude of the Bible, its grandeur, both in terms of the big picture and of its intricate and complex details.³²

Clarity

HAP can create anticipation and provide clarity for subsequent ground-level messages. A book-overview sermon can serve as a roadmap to let the congregation know where the series is going and what they will see along the way. It provides shared expectations so everyone knows what will and will not be covered. That way church members are not disoriented or disappointed along the way.

Reference

HAP, especially on the front end of a series, allows the preacher to relate the details of ground-level preaching back to the overview. The preacher can refer back to the already-established framework as he moves through the book. An inductive approach to a series where the overview sermon comes at the end has some appeal,³³ much like the inductive preaching of a paragraph. However, for clarity, comprehension, coherence, and overall retention, a series that is front-loaded by HAP is preferred.³⁴

Accommodation

HAP can also be an effective way to accommodate different learning styles and stages. For those who benefit from a map and need a framework to make sense of the parts, HAP can be extremely helpful.³⁵ And for new or untaught believers, HAP can be a great way to introduce them to more of the Bible more quickly.

³² Lloyd-Jones expresses the relationship and balance between high-altitude and ground-level preaching this way: “Let us begin by taking a general view of it [Ephesians], for we can only truly grasp and understand the particulars if we have taken a firm grasp of the whole and of the general statement. On the other hand those who imagine that, by giving a rough division of the message of this Epistle according to chapters, they have dealt with it adequately display their ignorance. It is when we come to the details that we discover the wealth; a summary of its message is most helpful as a beginning, but it is when we come to the particular statements and individual words that we find the real glory displayed to our wondering gaze.” David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1978), 12. Dever concurs, “Sometimes you can see things from a great height, where you can take in the whole, that you cannot see down below. It can be difficult to get to such a position and it might take a little more work, but it bears great fruit.” *Message of the Old Testament*, 67.

³³ An inductive approach gives the preacher the opportunity to engage sermon after sermon with the details and conclude with a high-altitude sermon that puts the pieces together. Preaching an overview sermon on the front end requires significant planning and study beforehand and requires that the preacher come to some interpretive conclusions before the series starts.

³⁴ The ideal in many cases, especially with a longer series, is to begin and end a book series with HAP.

³⁵ Both cognitive science and neuroscience point to the value of starting with the big picture. The Evidence Based Teachers Network argues, “There is growing evidence that the brain needs two versions of the material being taught:

- The big picture of the whole topic.

Variety

HAP gives the listener a break from the ground-level approach to weekly exposition. They are able to come up for air, get a different perspective, and return to the usual approach with greater understanding and vigor. From a preaching standpoint, incorporating HAP into the mix adds variety for the preacher and the audience while still maintaining fidelity to biblical exposition.³⁶

Holism

HAP encourages church members to think holistically in terms of entire Bible books, not just isolated chapters or memory verse texts. By hitting some of the big themes that run through whole books, people begin to associate these themes with the books themselves. For example, what book of the Bible would or could people turn to in order to study the providence of God? Would their minds turn to Genesis? This type of thinking is a step beyond merely asking, “What passages or verses address this topic?” Just as church members might recommend a book to someone with a particular question or need, through HAP church members are equipped to recommend entire Bible books to others to address those same questions and needs.³⁷ This approach would likely encourage and inspire church members to read entire books of the Bible in one sitting.³⁸

Equipping

HAP equips people to do what is probably less natural and less obvious to them. Many Christians have grown up meditating on small, bite-sized portions of the Bible. They have been given tools for observation, interpretation, and application. But how many believers know how to trace a theme through a book? How many church members are equipped to move from a book of the Bible into the metanarrative of Scripture? How many church members know how to do biblical theology? HAP can help by modeling hermeneutically responsible whole-book and whole-Bible connections.³⁹

-
- The detailed knowledge.

Teachers sometimes forget that they already have the big picture and assume that the students will build it as the topic develops. Of course some do, but the big picture needs to be taught alongside the detail for effective learning to take place. . . . If we look at the visual cortex, we can see that it does two jobs at the same time. One route (the ‘what?’ route) looks at the detail, while the other (the ‘where?’ route) looks for the big picture.” “Advance Organisers: Giving Your Students the Big Picture”; accessed October 28, 2025, <https://ebtn.org.uk/big-picture-2/>. Giving people the broader context makes the information easier to retrieve, because it creates multiple entry points for the brain.

³⁶ Arthurs contends (30), “The primary reason [to preach with variety] is because God, the Great Communicator, uses variety.”

³⁷ I have heard Mark Dever make this argument on several occasions.

³⁸ In his overview sermon on Genesis, Dever encourages non-Christians to read the entire book: “Friend, if you are not a Christian, I implore you to take the time to read through the book of Genesis. You may find some details that confuse you. You may have some unanswered questions. But you cannot fail to find the message loudly and clearly proclaimed: there is a God, he made you with meaning and purpose, and you have failed to live and love as you were made to do.” *Message of the Old Testament*, 69.

³⁹ There is the danger, of course, of putting the Bible out of the reach of the average person with this approach (to the point where they are saying to themselves, “I could never do that.”) But that’s why showing (and not just telling) is important—there should be textual warrant for coming to these conclusions, not just subjective hunches. These biblical-

Framework

HAP not only gives the audience a framework for details, but it also gives the preacher the scaffolding necessary to engage in responsible ground-level preaching. HAP on the front end of a series keeps the preacher from losing his way interpretationally and getting sidetracked from the author's focus and intent. Starting with the big picture keeps the preacher in line with the author's overarching goal and message as he works his way through the individual parts.⁴⁰ HAP provides guardrails to keep the expositor from going off the road.⁴¹

Experience

HAP, especially the book-overview sermon, is an effective way of helping the contemporary audience experience how the original audience would have received the book under consideration. They were not received as bits and fragments in most cases, but as whole units conveying a complete, unified message. HAP allows preachers to immerse their listeners in the original historical context and help them hear and experience the book to some degree as the original audience would have.

Literacy

HAP is an effective remedy to the growing problem of biblical illiteracy in the church. Many church members are not even familiar with certain books of the Bible. Preachers may avoid starting a series through Leviticus for a number of reasons. However, a preacher is not obligated to spend an entire year or more working through Leviticus. He is at liberty to preach one message giving the church an overview or several messages tracing out key themes in Leviticus. Now the congregation knows enough about Leviticus to navigate it safely, even if they do not understand everything in detail.

Delight

HAP helps people see and delight in the larger redemptive purpose and storyline of the Bible. People rightfully object to certain expressions of Christ-centered preaching because it seems like a "Where's Waldo?" approach to finding Jesus in every verse. That said, unless there is a clear messianic

theological truths are not a mystery locked up and guarded for exclusive use by seminary-trained pastors. However, the pastor-teacher is a gift to the church for a reason (Eph 4:11–16). He provides truth that the church can hold fast to. But that truth comes not only in small textual packages but also as large threads and themes running through books and the Bible as a whole. Also, part of the pastor's preaching ministry is teaching people how to read the Bible for themselves. That is why showing over merely telling is to be preferred.

⁴⁰ One objection to this is the inability to know ahead of time what the book is truly about until you have preached through it. But this is why planning the series ahead of time is so important. Preachers should ideally secret themselves away for some big-picture planning and give themselves time to study the major contours of a book before diving into chapter 1, verse 1.

⁴¹ I can attest to the power of gaining a big-picture perspective to aid in preaching. For a number of years I taught a course called "New Testament Messages" where we surveyed all twenty-seven books of the NT each semester. This repeated exposure to the big picture of each book gave me intimate familiarity with the flow and structure of each book. It also gave me the confidence to navigate any part of the NT, understanding how each passage fits into its broader context. It is this big-picture perspective that greatly helps the preacher make meaningful cross-references in his teaching and preaching without losing track of the reference's contextual significance.

reference in the OT text or an explicit NT reference to the OT text, pastors may make little to no effort to preach the OT with reference to the larger redemptive storyline and the person and work of Jesus Christ. In part, the concern is that too much attention is drawn away from the OT passage and its unique message when preachers go big picture. But if a preacher regularly engages in HAP and is flying at 10,000 feet, it will be much easier and much more natural to see the grand scope of Scripture and preach Christ to the delight of the church.

Efficiency

Regular HAP alleviates the need or temptation to use biblical texts, especially in the OT, as springboards into the big picture. If a preacher wants to zoom out from a text and tap into the larger biblical-theological framework of Scripture, he has to balance his time carefully for a thirty-to-forty-minute message. However, if the literary context and Bible storyline are already clearly established in people's minds, then he can get to the big picture much faster and with less concern that it will feel forced or lack credibility whenever he needs to make those quick, big-picture connections.

Preachers who limit themselves to ground-level, weed-focused preaching keep their audiences from seeing and understanding big-picture themes and connections they might not otherwise see. Ground-level preaching will keep people's heads down and keep them from looking up and noticing the beautiful backdrop and landscape of the Bible. What will a preacher get if he zooms in on a narrative in Judges and stays there for the entire exposition? In order to make sense of the text as a Christian preacher preaching to New Covenant church members, context is required to understand and apply the passage correctly. A high-altitude sermon through the whole Book of Judges would give people an understanding of how the book fits into the storyline of the Bible and how it serves as a witness to Christ. Then the preacher could work through the narratives in Judges one by one with the larger framework already in view, allowing him to spend more time in the OT text while making quicker and more efficient reference to where the text stands in relation to Christ. This method is superior to the approach that spends ten minutes in the OT text and thirty minutes in the air. It is also superior to the approach of ending a sermon, say on the life of Gideon, with a tacked-on gospel connection: Jesus is the better Gideon.

Selectivity

HAP allows a preacher to get the message of the book across without getting all tangled up in the controversies and interpretive conundrums of the book.⁴² The audience gets the core message and the pastoral purpose of the book without getting tripped up and tangled up in all the debated texts. HAP can be especially helpful for young or beginning preachers who are not yet up to speed on various controversies and may not know where they stand exactly on certain eschatological or ecclesiological issues.

⁴² For example, a pastor can preach Revelation at a high altitude and focus on the encouraging message of this book designed to encourage persecuted believers without getting bogged down or sidetracked by the complex imagery and eschatological debate. That is not to say that ground-level preaching in Revelation should not be done and the particulars of eschatology discussed. But it is not the only way to preach the Book of Revelation.

Challenges of High-Altitude Preaching

Though there are many benefits to HAP, the preacher will need to remain alert to and strive to overcome several significant challenges.

Scope

The scope of content can be daunting for HAP. How do you prepare for a sermon when your text consists of fifty chapters? The time needed to work through this much material requires careful planning and an approach to the sermon that differs significantly from handling one to two verses. The usual one week of sermon preparation may not be sufficient for HAP.⁴³ And with reference to the sermon itself, can a preacher really cover all the chapters, establish the point, and apply it effectively in the allotted time for preaching? Can a thirty-to-forty-minute sermon really do justice to a book like Genesis? As a result many high-altitude sermons tend to transgress the time expectations for a given occasion.

Summarization

The high degree of selectivity required by HAP necessitates a high degree of summarization. When it comes to showing versus telling, telling will most often win out. The need to package up large amounts of material into a few sentences or paragraphs means that the listener misses out on seeing for himself or herself. The preacher has to be ultra-selective in what he takes time to reference in the text, and the listener will end up being more dependent on the preacher's synthesis and less able to be a "Berean" in the moment (Acts 17:11).

Confidence

It can be more difficult to determine the point and purpose of a larger textual unit, because it is made up of so many ideas and may involve several purposes. Expository preaching is set apart by its intention to say what the text says and to cut with the grain of the author's structure and purpose. But can the preacher really say with any degree of confidence, "Here is the central argument of Genesis" and "Here is why Genesis was written"? Unless a book has a clear thesis and purpose statement (like John's Gospel does in 20:30–31), it can be quite challenging to have any degree of clarity and confidence about these central concerns.

Inexperience

HAP can be challenging for the less-educated or inexperienced preacher whose lack of a developed biblical and systematic theology makes identifying and tracing out themes in a book and throughout the rest of the Bible overwhelming. There is a certain amount of knowledge and skill set needed for synthesis, putting the pieces together. As the years pass, preachers will form up their framework and

⁴³ How much time a preacher spends preparing a high-altitude sermon will depend to some extent on the preacher's background and past study in that book.

this kind of preaching will be easier. Even with increased whole-book and whole-Bible study, the preacher may lack experience in putting it all into a sermonic form with applicational intent.

Dependence

Younger, inexperienced, or less-educated preachers may also find themselves greatly dependent on secondary sources for HAP. Because of the scope of material, press for time, lack of confidence regarding the book's message and purpose, they will likely feel the need to turn more quickly to the resources. Though not a problem per se, the more heavily a preacher is dependent on the secondary sources, the less personal and contextualized the message becomes. Being a first-hand with the biblical material will always aid communication, especially in the terms of fervency and freedom from notes.

Assumptions

In terms of presentation, although HAP can help address the problem of biblical literacy (see "Literacy" above), high-altitude preachers often make certain assumptions that the biblically illiterate will not be able to follow or understand. The high degree of selectivity that is characteristic of HAP means that the preacher cannot cover everything. The preacher must be careful that what is skipped over is not a necessary building block for some listeners to process and understand what is being said.

Academic

HAP, especially book-overview sermons, are difficult to preach as sermons. Too many of these overviews sound like something fit for a college Bible class or seminary. They are filled with facts and figures. Dates, historical events and background information, complete with detailed reconstructions of the occasion that prompted the writing, overwhelm any sense of how the sermon is designed to transform the listener. The academic-lecture approach often comes at the expense of a pastoral voice and relevant application and exhortation.⁴⁴

Requirements for High-Altitude Preaching

The following are essential requirements for delivering effective high-altitude sermons, particularly the book-overview sermon.

Discernment

HAP requires discernment in selecting passages and themes to highlight. The preacher must ask, "What is the essential content that must be covered?" There must be a clear strategy. For example, "What are the key passages that best convey the structure and argument of the book without overwhelming the listeners with too many references and too much material?" In most cases the book

⁴⁴ It is precisely because of the academic, information-heavy nature of these sermons that some would object to preaching them as sermons and instead reserve them for Sunday school or some other teaching venue. However, much of the problem with that mindset is its inability to approach the book with a high degree of selectivity and focus.

or sermon purpose must guide and govern the selection and arrangement of materials. Haddon Robinson argues, “Sermons seldom fail because they have too many ideas; more often they fail because they deal with too many unrelated ideas.”⁴⁵ Deciding which ideas should be the governing ideas requires discernment.

Focus

In tandem with discernment, HAP requires an understanding of the book’s core. Because there is so much material to cover in most Bible books, the preacher needs to be crystal clear on what he needs to know in order to get it right and get it across.⁴⁶ He needs to drill down into the core interpretative and expositional elements: who, where, how, why, and what. Without this type of laser focus the sermon will likely lack clarity and purposeful progression. The “greatest hits” approach, where preachers choose out their favorite highlights from the book instead of getting at the book’s overall message and its development, is not an adequate substitute.

Discipline

HAP also requires the willingness and discipline to leave parts of the study on the cutting floor. The high-altitude preacher should be on the alert to avoid information avalanche or overwhelm. He must hold back on the desire to share everything he has learned in preparation and everything that may be relevant to an academic discussion of the book and its themes. The optimal balance is one that brings together sufficient breadth and depth.

Synthesis

HAP requires the ability to synthesize material. The preacher has to be able to take a large chunk of content and distill it down to its core in order to come up with a coherent exposition in a relatively short amount of time. Part of this synthesis involves getting at the main message or burden of the book. Without this ability preachers will be more dependent on secondary sources for these summaries.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 16.

⁴⁶ This language comes from Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God’s Word, Second Edition: A Hands-On Approach to Preparing, Developing, and Delivering the Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018).

⁴⁷ Are we teaching our students in Bible college and seminary to do this? It is not sufficient to have students read works that model synthesis and hear us give them the product of our own study. How many methodological courses instruct students in the practical tools and methods of determining the main theme and purpose of an entire biblical book with any degree of confidence? Much of this type of instruction takes place at the paragraph level. Even then I am not sure we are adequately equipping students to know how to go about arriving at the main point or argument. The methodological section of this paper is a small (but insufficient) attempt toward addressing that problem for HAP in particular.

Framework

HAP requires a robust theological framework. Preachers should have a clear grasp of the metanarrative of Scripture and how the major sections of the Bible work together as part of the promise-fulfillment structure of Scripture. They would benefit from knowing how the biblical covenants are connected and culminate in the New Covenant. They need to know how their English Bible is organized and how each section functions. They also need a strong systematic theology and understanding of the Bible's coherence.⁴⁸

Structure

HAP requires the preacher to function as a tour guide taking the congregation on a journey through a biblical book to the right destination. That means having a smooth, logical flow to avoid bumps and neck-breaking turns. The ability to structure a sermon with clear transitions and the ability to lead people deductively from an idea or inductively to an idea is crucial. With that much material in view, there are too many shiny objects vying for attention and ways of getting off course. A high-altitude sermon should not be disjointed and difficult for listeners to follow. There needs to be a beginning, middle, and end joined together by a clear argument developed logically.

Evaluation

HAP requires the ability to evaluate various interpretive perspectives found in the secondary literature. Though this is true of all preaching, it is especially the case with HAP, since opinions regarding a book's message, purpose, and outline⁴⁹ may vary widely. Though these resources can be helpful, they will confront the preacher with a number of options, requiring them to evaluate and come to a conclusion.

Edification

HAP requires pastoral awareness of the church's needs and a desire to shepherd the flock through big-picture preaching. HAP cannot be done to show off the preacher's biblical-theological muscles. It

⁴⁸ Helm's caution is good and necessary: "While I advocate for the role of systematics in preaching, there is a difference between this and teaching systems" (83).

⁴⁹ In his overview sermon on Romans, Lloyd-Jones quibbles with the traditional approach to outlining Romans. "Let us look at the Epistle as a whole; let us try to get a bird's-eye view of the great and massive argument. Many classifications have been suggested and surely there is an obvious preliminary division. The first eleven chapters are doctrinal, and then the rest, from chapter twelve to sixteen, is practical, the application of the doctrine that has already been laid down. That is a fundamental subdivision. But it is when we come to the subdivision of section one that I think we need to be careful, and to be exact in our subdivision. How many of you are familiar with some such classification as this? People say, 'Chapters one to four, Justification; chapters five to eight, Sanctification; chapters nine to eleven, parenthetical, dealing with the particular case of the Jews and its final solution'.

"Now I want to suggest strongly that that is a very misleading, and eventually harmful classification, and it is because so many have adopted it that they have got into difficulty over chapters five, six, seven and eight. It is the classification found in the Scofield Bible, but not confined to it—many have copied it from there and it has become quite well-known. But I want to suggest something different to you." *Exposition of Chapter 1—The Gospel of God*, vol. 1 of *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1985), 23–24.

cannot consist of an information dump to show the audience the extent of the preacher's knowledge and study. Effective high-altitude preachers need a strong pastoral tone in taking the point and purpose of the book across to today's church in applicable ways. The church and its edification have to be in view throughout the process.⁵⁰

Spiral Preaching

Description of Spiral Preaching

I am not arguing for a one-and-done approach to the book sermon, though any of the HAP models can be preached as a one-time, stand-alone sermon. Spiral preaching is preaching that makes multiple, strategic passes through a book at various times with the intention to establish a foundation and then build off that foundation later with greater degrees of complexity and depth.

Perhaps the best approach to beginning an expository book series is the stand-alone overview sermon or the expository book sermon (bringing together in one message the who, what, why, and how in relative proportion). But an expository sermon series could begin with more than one high-altitude sermon: a book overview sermon *followed by* several biblical-theological book sermons highlighting key thematic threads. For example, the first pass through Genesis might emphasize Creation while a second pass might highlight God's providence.

Spiral preaching, then, consists of multiple passes through a book from multiple angles over a span of time. That is high-altitude spiral preaching (HASP). It can be compared to stopping at multiple overlooks to take in the same basic landscape. Or it is like traveling through the same region each year but taking different routes each time.

Basis of Spiral Preaching

The label *spiral preaching* is original to me. But it is based on a well-known pedagogical strategy called "the spiral curriculum."⁵¹ The idea behind the spiral curriculum is that the teacher revisits a topic over time with increasing levels of complexity and depth. This ensures that students get repeated exposure to the topic but also that with each successive touch point the teacher is building on (connecting to and expanding on) those previous interactions, ideally adding more sophistication and substance and moving students over time toward higher-order thinking skills.

Benefits of Spiral Preaching

There are a number of benefits to spiral preaching. First, it strengthens long-term retention of the material by circling back around to the same books and themes over time. This spaced repetition

⁵⁰ This is not to rule out the possibility of high-altitude evangelistic preaching. In his overview sermon on Genesis, Dever does a commendable job of repeatedly engaging with non-Christians and appealing to them to repent and believe. See the chapter on Genesis in *Message of the Old Testament*.

⁵¹ The spiral curriculum is associated with Jerome Brunner and his work *The Process of Education*. Aidan Severs, "What Is A Spiral Curriculum: A Teacher's Guide to What, How And When To Implement," Third Space Learning, March 31, 2023, <https://thirdspacelearning.com/blog/spiral-curriculum/>.

reinforces memory. What are five to ten foundational themes that preachers should be highlighting on a regular basis? What are the big ideas Christians should not lose sight of, and what books convey those ideas? Second, spiral preaching reduces cognitive load or overwhelm by layering the approach and moving from simple to more complex over time. Third, it provides a logical progression to the learning experience and a coherent theological curriculum. The congregation is able to see how doctrines relate to and build upon each other. Fourth, spiral preaching provides a fresh perspective with each subsequent pass through the book. This is a great way to maintain interest and keep the congregation engaged. It is the same book but from a different angle, keeping the coverage from becoming repetitive or stale.

Challenges of Spiral Preaching

There are, of course, limitations to the approach. First, it is challenging to develop a cohesive spiral curriculum. Planning and coordination and time are all required to make sure that the topics are revisited effectively. Second, if it is not well-planned and executed, there may be little to no advance in complexity or depth. Church members will end up with a repetitive and superficial understanding of the topic. Or, if there is too much space between visits, the congregation may have forgotten the foundation and need re-teaching. Third, spiral preaching can be challenging to address interconnected ideas adequately in layers. Fourth, spiral preaching is less common (rare?) as an approach, so there is less instruction on how to do it and fewer models to learn from. Are there any historical examples of preachers who approached preaching in this way? Fifth, some preachers are concerned that such a high degree of intentionality in planning out the preaching calendar will squelch the Holy Spirit's leading and lead to an inflexible plan. Though planning is important, it must be done in dependence on the Spirit in prayer. A spiral approach to preaching needs to be flexible and adaptable to congregational needs. Sixth, where are pastors going to find the time to plan out their preaching calendars this far in advance? Seventh, spiral preaching can be difficult in a ministry context where there is much transition and flux, with people coming and going. It is easier in an educational context where the same students will likely move through the system grade by grade and be assured of hearing the topic addressed progressively. For preaching this may mean the need to keep the distance between the passes shorter or to provide some review or supplemental resources to keep everyone up to speed and at the same level. Preachers need to be careful not to assume a certain level of knowledge or competency. As much as possible each message should be accessible to everyone, even if it is more complex in the development of certain themes.

Requirements of Spiral Preaching

HAP preaching, especially spiral preaching, requires the ability to think and plan from a long-term perspective. Preachers must ask questions such as, "How does this one sermon fit into my larger plan for the church over the course of three to five years?" It is this kind of thinking that helps him

determine what to include in one sermon and what to save for future sermons.⁵² That is why HAP and especially spiral preaching are best done by regular preachers who plan to be at a church for the foreseeable future.⁵³ Even at the weekly level, HAP is likely going to require more planning and preparation than an expository message from a paragraph. Sufficient planning is required, of course, to avoid being repetitive. Preachers need to be asking themselves, “What will each new pass add in terms of connections, insight, or applications?”

Table 6. High-Altitude Preaching and Spiral Preaching

	High-Altitude Preaching	Spiral Preaching
Definition	Preaching a 10,000-foot overview of an entire book or larger textual unit	Multiple, strategic passes through a book, building complexity and depth with each revisit
Basis	Liberty in form in 2 Tim 4:2; high-altitude examples in Acts 2, Acts 7, and Luke 24	Pedagogical strategy of “spiral curriculum”—revisiting topics with increasing complexity
Benefits	Provides perspective, clarity, variety, and holistic understanding; equips believers to trace themes; helps to remedy biblical illiteracy; fosters delight; increases efficiency; allows selectivity	Strengthens retention; reduces cognitive load; provides logical progression; offers fresh perspectives; maintains interest
Challenges	Daunting scope; requires significant summarization; difficult to determine main point; challenging for inexperienced preachers; potential over-reliance on secondary sources; risk of assumptions; can sound academic	Challenging to develop cohesive curriculum; risk of superficial understanding; difficulty with interconnected ideas; rare approach; concern about squelching the Spirit; time commitment; difficult in high-transition contexts
Requirements	Discernment in selecting themes; focus on core interpretive elements; discipline in exclusion of material; ability to synthesize; robust theological framework; clear sermon structure; evaluation of secondary literature; pastoral awareness	Long-term planning; sufficient planning to avoid repetition and add insight; best for regular preachers with long tenure at a church

⁵² For two of the better-known and helpful books that address sermon planning (albeit from a yearly standpoint), see Rummage, *Planning Your Preaching*, and Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan*. Are we teaching homiletics students at the graduate level how to do this? More attention should be given to helping preachers know how to do long-range planning.

⁵³ It would be conceivable for a guest preacher to preach through a whole book such as Habakkuk. But overview sermons that commence or conclude an expository book series or attempt to make multiple passes over time through one book of the Bible are usually going to be preached by those who are the primary preachers at their church.

The Methodology of HASP

High-Altitude Preaching and Genesis

Following is the method I went through to prepare an overview sermon on Genesis.⁵⁴ This is simply one of the many versions of HAP discussed earlier. But it does provide an example, and many of its major sections (steps) are transferable to other types of HAP. There are many things to look for and do in the process of preparing a sermon, but Table 7 captures my primary concerns.

Table 7. Primary Considerations in Sermon Preparation

Category	Interpretation	Proclamation
(1) People —author, recipients, occasion	Who is writing to whom? When and where?	To whom am I preaching? When and where?
(2) Point —content and argument	What is the author saying to them?	What do I want to say to my audience?
(3) Purpose —intention and response	Why is the author writing to his audience?	Why do I want to say this to them? How do I want them to respond?
(4) Path —organization and style	How is the author saying it?	How am I going to say it?

Though there is overlap and flexibility, I usually work in this direction during the exegetical and theological phases: 4 → 2 → 1 → 3. During the homiletical phase I work in this direction: 1 → 2 → 3 → 4. Table 8 summarizes the sermon-construction process, and the ensuing discussion elaborates.

Table 8. Sermon-Construction Steps

#	Step
1	Read through the entire book multiple times in one sitting.
2	Develop the book outline.
3	Determine the book argument.
4	Trace out any key words or concepts in the book.
5	Develop a book purpose statement.
6	Engage in theological analysis.
7	Craft the sermon purpose.
8	Craft the sermon argument.

⁵⁴ Though not poles apart, the process described here is with a view toward preaching Genesis, not just studying Genesis. For the average pastor (especially the bivocational one) who does not have the luxury of spending forty hours a week on sermon preparation, there needs to be a solid but efficient pathway from study to sermon. This is why seminary training and personal study and education are so important, because all of that can be quickly downloaded for a message like this, expediting the process without compromising quality and textual/theological integrity. Nor does this process expand on the spiritual and devotional aspects of sermon preparation, yet no sermon should be constructed apart from prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit, fellowship with Christ, and the personalization of the message to one's own life.

#	Step
9	Craft the homiletical outline.
10	Consult secondary sources.
11	Write out the sermon.

Step 1: Read through the Entire Book Multiple Times in One Sitting⁵⁵

First Reading

I read through Genesis using *The NIV Sola Scriptura Bible Project*, which has no chapter or verse references. Though you could read multiple translations over the course of multiple read-throughs, I tend to use a more dynamic translation for this type of initial reading. Then as you go back to key sections to do your exegetical work, engage in translation comparison and reference more formal translations. During this first read-through I did not take any notes in order to experience the book without interruption.

Second Reading

During my second read-through I took seven half-sheet pages of notes. These notes were focused on determining the outline or structure of Genesis and its content (primarily chapter content and chapter summaries). During this reading I was looking for key/repeated words, themes, and verses. Already at this stage I was beginning to think about what I want to highlight in the sermon, but those thoughts needed to take a back seat to further investigation. I noticed the emphasis on seed and blessing, and I began to note things I wanted to go back to and dig into deeper or trace out (like the number of references to “blessing” in Genesis).

Ultimately what I wanted to be able to do is capture the entire book in one sentence in the form of an argument.⁵⁶ I was also looking for indicators in the text as to why Genesis was written. This may require some big-picture thinking, but at this point it was on my radar. So I was paying attention to any purpose-type statements in the book (e.g., Gen 50:20). By the end of this second reading I had a nine-page document of chapter content, summarizing each chapter in one line and underneath listing brief descriptions of the main actions of the narrative.

Third Reading

During my third read-through I scanned Genesis with my chapter-content document open and revised it based on another pass through the book. I was concerned, however, not just to understand the parts but to understand how the parts fit together and work together to advance the author’s

⁵⁵ See Crossway, “5 Benefits to Reading Entire Books of the Bible in One Sitting,” August 29, 2017, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/5-benefits-to-reading-entire-books-of-the-bible-in-one-sitting/>. I also listened to the David Suchet Audio Bible as I read. Reading/listening through Genesis took me about four and a half hours. I also recommend listening to an audio version of the book (even without the text in front of you) as many times as possible.

⁵⁶ By “argument” I mean a statement consisting of (1) what is true (the main theological assertion of the book) and (2) what is required (the response called for by what is true).

argument and purpose. At this point I realized that there were certain pieces of the story that were unclear to me, in terms of how they fit into the overarching narrative.⁵⁷ Placing a bookmark in those sections set a reminder to do further study there and eventually engage with secondary sources for help.

Additional Readings

With each read-through I continued adding to and refining my list of key words and themes, and I continued to connect more dots. At this point I was ready to formulate an outline of the book and summarize its contents.

Step 2: Develop the Book Outline

During this stage I wanted to get clarity on the book's major divisions. Following is a broad three-part outline of Genesis:

- I. The Seed Promised (1–11)
- II. The Seed Pinpointed/Particularized (12–38)
- III. The Seed Preserved (39–50)

Though I wanted to re-present the book and its outline accurately, I was preparing a sermon (not a lecture) with the intention of helping my listeners become acquainted with Genesis. So even at this stage I was working with the wording to make it simple and accessible without sacrificing precision and accuracy. The power of HASP comes in alleviating the preacher from the need to cover everything in one message. Spiral preaching is designed to make multiple passes over time with increasing depth and complexity. Since I was preparing an overview sermon, I wanted people to have a clear sense of the basic framework of Genesis without being overwhelmed by detail. The details and layering could come later. I could work with several different possibilities for an outline. Here is one that highlights key events and people in the book:

- I. Creation (1–2)
- II. Fall (3)
- III. Noah: Judgment and Salvation (4–11)
- IV. Abraham and His Offspring (12–50)
 - A. Abraham
 - B. Isaac
 - C. Jacob/Israel
 - Joseph

⁵⁷ For example, why is there so much space taken up with Isaac's livestock (the speckled and the unspeckled)? Creation gets two chapters and Isaac's goats get nearly two! What is the point about the stolen gods from Laban's household and Rachel sitting on them? (ch. 31). Or why mention certain events such as Reuben sleeping with Bilhah? In each case I am wrestling with how individual parts fit together and relate to the whole.

Step 3: Determine the Book Argument

One of my objectives in preaching an overview sermon is to communicate the main unifying message that runs through the whole book. I want my audience to have clarity on how the book is structured so that they know the lay of the land and what holds everything together, without being too detailed. The level of detail would depend on my audience (their biblical educational background) and my time, occasion, and purpose for the sermon. But to do a text argument for an entire book you have to get clear on the core components of the book. In the case of Genesis, here are the ones I identified: Creation, Fall (judgment to Noah), 3:15 (protoevangelium), offspring, Abraham and his descendants, the Abrahamic Covenant (blessing, offspring, land), and the preservation of Abraham's offspring (the story of Joseph).

My book argument ended up going through three revisions. The second draft was an attempt to follow the sequence of the book in the statement itself. The third attempt was an effort to condense the argument and boil it down to its essence.

Table 9. Book Argument of Genesis

First Draft	Second Draft	Third Draft
God is going to bless fallen and cursed humanity through the fallen yet blessed (increasing/serpent crushing) offspring of Abraham in spite of all obstacles (preservation).	Though God's image bearers (chs. 1–2) have rebelled against his good rule and are subject to the curse (ch. 3), God has promised to reverse the curse (3:15) for all who deserve his judgment (4–11), and bring blessing through blessed Abraham and his offspring (12–50).	God has promised to bless his fallen image bearers deserving of judgment through the blessed, serpent-crushing offspring of Abraham.

Step 4: Trace Out Any Key Words or Concepts in the Book

At this point I wanted to trace out the words *blessed* and *blessing* that were highlighted in my readings. So I identified the underlying Hebrew terms and did a word study using Logos Bible Software's Bible Word Study feature on both the verb form (בִּרְךָ) and the noun form (בִּרְכָה). I wanted to understand their semantic range and use within Genesis. I wanted to see if there were any connections with other themes, especially those reflected in my book outline and argument. I found that Genesis contains more references to blessing than any other book in the OT (surpassing other large books such as Deuteronomy and Psalms). This opening book of the Bible reveals God's heart toward his fallen and cursed Creation and creatures. It reveals a God who, though holy and just, has a favorable, curse-reversing disposition of kindness toward mankind (cf. Titus 3:4). Another observation I made had to do with blessing and fruitfulness. I knew that connection occurred in chapter 1, but I did not realize how much it continues after that. It became apparent that the blessing of Abraham's fruitfulness will be for the blessing of the nations.

I also consulted Hebrew lexicons and theological wordbooks. These sources categorize the uses, something that could be done by simply reading each occurrence of the word in context. However,

the sources provide a vast study of the word beyond Genesis (e.g., LXX and ANE uses). They provide charts with detailed breakdowns and helpful analysis and summary sections. They both confirmed and added to my initial first-hand work. As I engaged with this material, I was asking myself, “What are the implications of this sense or idea for Genesis as a whole and for the sermon?”

Step 5: Develop a Book Purpose Statement

Identifying why an author wrote a particular book of the Bible can be one of the most challenging tasks, simply because most books do not come with an explicit purpose statement. The purpose has to be identified by looking at the content (what the author says, especially noting any indicators of his intentions) and considering the relationship between the writer, his audience, and the occasion. In other words, understanding the “why” of a book requires understanding the “what” (content) in relation to the “who” (author and audience). I start with the content. Based on my engagement with the content of Genesis and my book argument drafts, I could surmise that Genesis is designed to introduce various “beginnings” (God, Creation, Fall, the Israelites, etc.). Specifically, it is designed to introduce God’s plan of redemption through the seed of Abraham.

Since Genesis does not identify its author and recipients, I turned to various secondary sources for help in this area.⁵⁸ Based on that study, I came to the conclusion that Moses was writing to the nation Israel prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. With the people and occasion in view, I represented the purpose of Genesis this way: *Moses is writing Genesis to Israel to:*

- Remind them of who God is.
- Remind them of who they are and why they exist.
- Warn them through many examples about what will happen if they fail to believe.
- Encourage them to trust in God who is always faithful to his covenant promises.

Step 6: Engage in Theological Analysis

Fundamental to HAP is theological analysis. I highlighted biblical theology in my preparation for this sermon because I was approaching Genesis with more of a narrative framework than a doctrinal one. In other forms of HAP, systematic theology would play a more prominent role in preparation.

Relationship to the Pentateuch and the OT

At this point I was asking myself two big questions. First, what is the relationship between Genesis and the Pentateuch and the entire OT? Here is where I drew on years of Bible reading and teaching to quickly download some thoughts. Otherwise, I would be more dependent on secondary sources. The Pentateuch is the first act of God’s grand story of redemption. It contains the initial promise of redemption through the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), the identification of the particular seed through whom God would bless the nations (Gen 12:1–3)—the descendants of Abraham. The rest of

⁵⁸ One such source was John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

the Pentateuch is the story of how God is fulfilling his promises to Abraham through the nation Israel: their redemption from Egypt, their covenant with God, the laws that made up the covenant, and their preparation to enter the land of promise. Genesis is the beginning of that story of redemption through Abraham's descendants, the human focus of the rest of the books in the OT.

Relationship to the NT

Second, what is the relationship between Genesis and the NT? Using the New Testament Use of the Old Testament tool in Logos Bible Software, I created a list of quotations and allusions to Genesis in the NT. I preferred to start here so that there were objective and textually based grounds for moving from Genesis to the NT. These are much stronger than statements such as "Jesus is the better Joseph." Logos identified 188 allusions, eighteen echoes, twelve citations, and ten quotations (228 total). I scrolled through the list looking for ones that stood out to me or might be fruitful in relation to the book argument and purpose.

Topics that connect Genesis to the NT and that resonated with me as possible connection points for the sermon were as follows: Creation, image of God, rest, tree of life, disobedience and death, protoevangelium, Creation cursed, Cain and Abel, wickedness of the human heart, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Sodom, Jacob, and Judah. I created a list of quotations of and allusions to Genesis under those topic headings and then annotated them, noting all the possible connections I might want to develop in the sermon.

Throughout the sermon construction process, I moved from analysis to synthesis and back to analysis again. The fruit of my theological analysis would be to craft a theological or canonical argument for Genesis in light of my biblical-theological reflection. Here is mine. Keep in mind that this is not a statement for my audience or for the sermon. It is designed to help me think clearly about high-altitude relationships and connections.

Against all hope from a human perspective, God is rescuing his fallen creatures from judgment, restoring his image of true righteousness and holiness in them, and reconciling their relationship (granting them a right status) with him not by works but through obedience-expressed faith in the promised seed of Abraham, the rightful king of Judah, Jesus Christ, whose offering establishes a new covenant, giving victory over sin, death, and the serpent, and the right to enter God's rest and eat from the tree of life in the paradise/city of God.

I went go back to the book purpose statement and considered enhancing it in light of the canonical context and the Holy Spirit's progressively revealed intention for the Book of Genesis.

Step 7: Craft the Sermon Purpose

As I turned the corner officially from my exegetical and theological analysis to the sermon, I wanted to start by connecting my audience and their needs to the following: the book argument, the canonical argument, and the book purpose. In particular, *by the end of this message I want my audience to:*

- Understand the argument, purpose, and structure of Genesis.
- Be confident that God will fulfill his promises no matter what “impossible” circumstances appear to stand in the way.
- Reject a works-based approach to righteousness before God and accept the substitute offering of God’s beloved Son, Abraham’s Seed and source of curse-reversing blessing.
- Praise the Lord for rescuing us from deserved judgment and from the wickedness of our own hearts and giving us victory over sin, death, and the serpent.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of the purpose statement for effective preaching in general and for high-altitude preaching in particular. A clear purpose will aid in giving the sermon a strong applicational focus and keep it from becoming a lecture on various aspects of the book. The purpose statements above serve as a filter to help me know what should come into the message and what should stay out.

Step 8: Craft the Sermon Argument

The sermon argument is the case or claim I would like to make in the message that is drawn heavily from the book argument but also informed by the audience and sermon purpose. Here is my initial attempt: *Put your faith in the good news that God will rescue and restore fallen humanity through the serpent-crushing work of the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.* This first draft went through many revisions before becoming final, although I rarely enjoy a sense of finality about this foundational sentence.

Step 9: Craft the Homiletical Outline

Because I wanted my target audience to understand the structure of Genesis (see my first purpose statement), I organized my message based on the text outline of Genesis as much as possible. This is in contrast to a thematic approach, another legitimate form of HAP. I wanted to keep the outline as simple as possible. As I developed my outline, initially I thought through the key things I wanted to emphasize that are in line with my book/sermon argument and purpose, because I cannot and should not try to say everything in one message.

At this juncture I was wrestling with questions such as, “Should I state the main points historically, timelessly (theologically), or contemporarily?” It seemed to me that in this case a timeless statement was a nice compromise to avoid sounding like a lecture (historical) but also to avoid imposing contemporary application onto the structure. It worked well here because the focus was on what God has done and is doing. The Book of Genesis does not come packaged as commands to us directly.

- I. God’s good creation is cursed and stands in need of blessing through the gospel (1–11).
 - A. God’s good creation (1–2)
 - B. The Fall (3)
 - C. The gospel (3:15)
 - D. The aftermath (4–11): sin and judgment

- II. God's curse-reversing blessing will come through Abraham and his seed (12–36).
 - A. God makes foundational promises to Abraham and his descendants.
 - B. These promises are reiterated to Isaac and Jacob/Israel.
- III. God's preservation of that seed points to his commitment to fulfill his promises to Abraham (37–50).
- IV. God's Son, Jesus, is Abraham's Seed and the rightful King of Judah, who will bring about the promised blessing.
 - A. Through the New Covenant
 - B. Through the offering of himself as a substitute (serpent crushing, phase 1)
 - C. Through his righteous rule (serpent crushing, phase 2)

Step 10: Consult Secondary Sources

The preacher will have to decide how much time to spend in self-discovery versus secondary sources. If I have six to eight hours to prepare a sermon, will I spend two hours reading resources outside the biblical text itself? Four hours? And where am I going to start? Do I start with self-discovery, move to the secondary sources, and then back to self-discovery (now with the secondary sources providing guidance), or back and forth as needed? Here are a few other questions a preacher can ask:

- Where am I stuck? Maybe I have gone as far as I can on my own. I have questions that need answers, but I am not able to answer those questions.
- Where and when do I need to check the work I have done and the conclusions I have come to?
- Where do I need to fill out and supplement the work I have done?
- How much time do I have for self-discovery?

Step 11: Write Out the Sermon

As I wrote out the sermon, I am focused on developing the outline (how) in a way that highlighted my argument (what) and served my purpose (why). When preaching an overview sermon, there is much that has to be glossed over, especially with a fifty-chapter book like Genesis. So I decided strategically which texts I was going to read and/or bring to my audience's attention. In the case of chapters 1–2 of Genesis, I wanted my audience to see that the original creation was “very good” so that they appreciate the devastating effects of the Fall. I wanted them to be introduced to the serpent, since he is a key player not only in Genesis but also in the whole Bible story. And I wanted them to see the blessing motif, because I wanted to underscore God's disposition of kindness from the beginning and to prepare them for the curse that is coming and the promise given to Abraham to bless the nations. In other words, as I developed my message I constantly asked myself, “What does my audience need to know now in order to be set up for connections and eye-opening moments later in the sermon?”

Spiral Preaching and Genesis

For a book like Genesis, the preacher could make a one-sermon pass initially through the entire book focusing on the major narrative progression and themes: Creation, Fall, Abraham, patriarchs, and Joseph. A second pass (that could include one or more sermons as part of a mini-series) could dig more deeply into theological themes such as God's sovereignty and providence or sin (its nature and consequences). A third pass could double-tap on the relevance of the Creation account for today's Christian or lessons from the lives of the patriarchs or how God's redemptive plan begins and culminates in Christ. Here is what a possible long-range plan for spiral preaching in Genesis might look like.

Year 1: First pass through Genesis (one sermon)—the overview sermon, a 10,000-foot aerial view from Creation to the formation of Israel, pointing out major landmarks

- Creation and Fall (1–3)
- The spread of sin and the flood (4-11)
- The patriarchal narratives (12–50)
 - Abraham's call and covenant
 - Isaac
 - Jacob
 - Joseph

Year 2: Second pass through Genesis (four sermons), deepening the study

- Creation covenant and Fall
- Noahic covenant
- Abrahamic covenant
- Patriarchal narratives

Year 3: Third pass through Genesis (seven sermons)

- The days of Creation
- The impact of the Fall
- The account of the flood—judgment/salvation
- The journey of Abraham—faith
- The life of Isaac
- The transformation of Jacob
- The story of Joseph—God's providence

Year 4: Fourth pass through Genesis (twenty-five sermons)

- Detailed exposition of specific passages

With previous foundation-laying messages in place, preachers do not feel the weight of covering everything, and they can zoom in on areas within the book without losing the overarching book

context and flow. This might be a remedy for the problem of moralistic-type preaching from OT narratives. It is going to be much safer to draw out moral life lessons and applications from the patriarchs if the larger book context (its message and purpose and placement in the metanarrative of Scripture) is (and has been) in view.

One reason some preaching of the OT fails is the fact that the preacher disproportionately emphasizes the larger context to the detriment of giving sufficient attention to the text. There is thirty percent OT text (if that) followed by seventy percent context. But if one were to preach the larger context as a stand-alone message, if the preacher engaged regularly in high-altitude spiral preaching, he would be free to spend more time in the details of the OT text and not feel like he has to preach two sermons.⁵⁹ He could also press into the applicational parallels and character examples (both positive and negative) with less concern for legalism or moralism.

Conclusion

Ground-level preaching remains foundational to any fruitful ministry of the Word. Pastors should continue preaching “verse by verse” through books of the Bible as their regular approach to weekly exposition. This paper is a call for preachers to supplement that approach. It is a call to expand the scope of their preaching texts from microscopic to macroscopic and give careful thought to the scope and sequence of their preaching calendar beyond the next book and the next year.

In this paper I have argued for high-altitude spiral preaching (HASP). Preaching entire books of the Bible cyclically, from various angles, and with increasing depth and complexity provides the church with a rich and varied diet from God’s Word. In an age of biblical illiteracy and fragmented Scripture knowledge, HASP is an approach to help pastors equip their churches to enjoy a high-altitude perspective and engage with the whole counsel of God.

⁵⁹ It is always dangerous to assume certain knowledge. See Chapell, 253–55. Therefore, every message preached by a Christian minister should provide some degree of explicit gospel orientation.