

Interpreting a Biblical Passage

Getting the Main Idea

1. Review what you've learned about your passage from your translation comparison, historical setting, discourse and genre analyses, and word study.
2. In light of everything around it, what **sums up** the **main idea** of your passage? Sometimes the biblical writers include the main idea in:
 - ⇒ A single statement (e.g., the first or last sentence, climax of the story, or "therefores" of the argument)
 - ⇒ Dialogue spoken by a key character or a concluding command (the **imperative**)
 - ⇒ Repeated words or concepts
 - ⇒ Unusual or theologically/morally pointed words or concepts
3. Capture the essence of the main point as a brief sentence (no more than 12 words) that could serve as a **headline** or a **meme caption**. (You may find online or create an appropriate gif or image.)
4. Show how the wider context reinforces, explain, or expand upon your main point through:
 - ⇒ the **immediate context** (a **discourse analysis** and **genre analysis** locate the passage in its larger context)
 - ⇒ an **outline** of the passage – summarize each point in the passage (a **sentence diagram** helps)
 - ⇒ **words** or concepts developed throughout the whole biblical book (your **word study** may help). E.g.,:

✓ **The Great Commission** (Matthew 28.16-20) – Jesus' final command in the passage and in the whole Gospel is "**teach**," concluding Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as a **teacher** (e.g., Matthew organizes his Gospel around Jesus' teaching speeches in Matthew 5-7, 10, 13, 18, 24-25; the STEP Bible shows 13 uses throughout Matthew). Matthew 28.16-20 "passes the torch" of **teaching** from Jesus to his disciples.

Avoid creating a "main idea" that is just **your own** idea or regurgitating a generic "biblical truth" you are applying to a text that says nothing at all about that idea. Stay **specifically** on the passage. E.g.,:

✗ **David slays Goliath** (1 Samuel 17) – this is **not** clearly about "slaying personal giants" but establishes David as God's faithful leader for Israel, supported by the context of 1 Samuel 13-16 where God rejects Saul's faithlessness.

5. Summarize your passage's **main point** and **supporting points** so that you can answer, "What is this passage about?" in 30 seconds or less. Write this out in a single-paragraph "**elevator pitch**" short enough to **Tweet** or post as a video on **Instagram** or **TikTok**.
6. Transfer these points into contemporary language for contemporary situations:

In your sermon or study outline:

- ✗ **Don't** use proper names (Bible characters or places) as this holds the message in the past
 - ✓ **Do** use the names of God or Jesus
- ✗ **Don't** use the past-tense, as though this passage is only for "back then"
 - ✓ **Do** use present tense and imperatives
- ✗ **Don't** use third-person pronouns (*they, them, it, she, he; and that, those*) as this removes your audience from the text
 - ✓ **Do** use first-person plural pronouns (*us, we, our*) to connect the message with today

From Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Baker, 2003), pp. 57-58.

Finding the Main Ideas: Examples

Finding the main ideas in narrative:

“The best way to create an outline is to **organize the story along the lines of its plot elements**. If more than two or three scenes or episodes make up a plot element, then list them as subpoints in the outline. Finally, write out your outline points as sentences. This will force you to think more accurately...[T]his is not the sermon outline; it is the exegetical outline. You will return to it later when you prepare a sermon outline” (Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* [Baker, 2002], 55-56).

Genesis 22.1-16

- I. *Exposition*: God’s intent to test Abraham (22.1)
- II. *Crisis*: God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (22.2)
- III. *Rising Tension*: Abraham responds with obedience (22.3-10)
 - A. Abraham travels to the mountain of sacrifice to worship God (22.3-6)
 - B. Abraham assures Isaac that God will provide the lamb (22.7-8)
 - C. Abraham prepares to slay Isaac (22.9-10)
- IV. *Resolution*: God prevents Abraham from slaying Isaac and provides a ram (22.11-14)
 - A. The Angel of the Lord stops Abraham from sacrificing Isaac and commends Abraham’s fear of God (22.11-12)
 - B. God provides Abraham a ram for sacrifice (22.13-14)
- V. *Conclusion*: The Angel of the Lord reaffirms God’s blessing on and promise to Abraham (22.15-16)

Main idea: Abraham proves his reverence of God.

Finding the main ideas in poetry:

Identifying the main ideas in poetry requires paying attention to its structures of 1) parallelism; and, when possible, 2) the type poetry (e.g., lament, praise, wisdom, etc.).

Trace the flow of thought by describing each couplet in terms faithful to its form of parallelism (synonymous, antithetical, synthetic). Then, map the poem its type (e.g., lament, praise, wisdom, etc.) In your descriptions, try to keep with the poet’s imagery and language. Identify the main point of the poem:

E.g., structuring a **lament**:

“The focal point of the lament is in one or more complaint elements, for this will often tell us why the writer even bothered to compose the lament” (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* [Baker, 2003], 124.

Lamentations 2

- I. (No invocation)
- II. Complaints
 - A. Because suffering comes from the Lord (2.1-10)
 - B. Because suffering affects God’s servant (2.11-13)
- III. Confession of sin
 - A. Because suffering provokes such personal responses (2.14-19)
 - B. Because suffering makes its complaint to the Lord (2.20-22)

E.g., structuring a **praise song**:

Psalm 100

- I. All earth: worship God with song and gladness [Call to praise] (100.1-3a)
- II. God made us all: we are his sheep [Cause for praise] (100.3b-c)
- III. Enter God’s presence with singing forever [Recapitulation to praise] (100.4-5)

Finding the main ideas in proverbial wisdom:

Wisdom literature shares much in common with poetry and narrative, especially when it occurs as part of an extended discourse as in the book of Job or Song of Songs. In contexts such as **Proverbs**, **Ecclesiastes**, and to some extent the book of **James**, wisdom appears as brief sentences.

“The preacher usually is well advised not to use individual proverbs (i.e., one or two liners) as discrete and separate texts in and of themselves, but rather to employ clusters of proverbs that focus on similar topics” (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* [Baker, 2003], 89).

Proverbs are often clustered with similarly themed proverbs nearby, helping reveal their main ideas. Consequently, a first step when looking for a proverb's main idea is to identify similar ideas nearby. This also helps set a particular proverb in a wider literary context and enables some structure for an outline.

Regrettably, some clues to identifying a proverb's larger context get lost in translation. Bruce Waltke remarks: "poetics works best with the Hebrew text. Unfortunately, the translators of the English versions of the Bible – of whom I confess to be one – are not as literate as the original audiences were. The authors of the Old Testament presumed an audience that could identify their subtle clues to meaning and rightly interpret their texts, but translators only now are beginning to pick them up" (Bruce K. Waltke, "Old Testament Interpretation Issues for Big Idea Preaching," in *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching*, eds. Keith Willhite and Scott M. Gibson [Baker, 1999], 51).

Proverbs 26.1-12

- I. Introduction: Honour is not fitting fools (26.1-3)
- II. Admonishing fools (26.4-5)
- III. The foolishness of honouring fools: comparisons (26.6-10)
- IV. Conclusion: There is no hope for a fool

Main idea: It is pointless to take fools seriously.

Finding the main ideas using a sentence diagram:

A **sentence diagram** can be a helpful way to create an outline and to identify the main ideas, especially for **letters** and **speeches**. For this, you require a fairly **literal** translation like ESV, NASB, NRSV.

“A careful assessment of the details of the text within its syntactical shape helps the preacher understand the text on and in its own terms. You are not imposing meaning, structure, and theology; rather, you are discovering meaning and structure along the route towards the theology or doctrine to be preached...What dominates the text should come through loud and clear in the message, whereas subordinate and supportive phrases, clauses, and thoughts should be viewed accordingly. The preacher will gain much by viewing the text as ‘a whole with significant parts.’ Such a perspective aids in the recognition of the primary or dominant theme(s) in the text and how they are expressed. Discerning the major ‘what’ of the text and the related ‘hows’ will help in the assessment of the ‘why’ of the text as well” (Stephen F. Olford with David L. Olford, *Anointed Expository Preaching* [Broadman & Holman, 1998], pp. 118-19).

Romans 12.1-2

I beseech you therefore, brothers and sister
by the mercies of God,
that you present your bodies a sacrifice
living,
holy,
acceptable to God
which is your reasonable service.
And do not be conformed
to this world,
But be transformed
by the renewing of your mind,
that you may prove what is that

EXEGETICAL OUTLINE

- I. Paul's appeal
- II. Present yourselves as a sacrifice
 - A. Characteristics of the sacrifice
 - B. Your sacrifice is "reasonable service"
- III. Don't be conformed to this world
- IV. Be transformed to prove God's will
 - A. Characteristics of God's will
 - B. Your transformation is by "renewal of your minds"

Main idea: Belonging wholly to God and not the world is a reasonable act that requires renewing your mind.

PRACTICE:

In your group, identify the main idea of the passage below assigned to you.

Use what you've learned in the course so far:

- ⊕ Make **observations** by comparing the passage in various translations. Note key ideas, words, concepts, characters, speech, etc.
- ⊕ Identify your passage's **genre** and how your passage fits it
- ⊕ create an outline of your passage:
 - If it is a **narrative** map your passage according to its plot;
 - If it is **poetry** map your passage according to the type of poetry;
 - If it is a **letter** outline the flow of thought through a sentence diagram.
- ⊕ Write a brief sentence that communicates the **main idea**
- ⊕ Prepare to **share** the main idea and supporting ideas in 30 seconds or less. If you like, structure your communication as a **meme**, **tweet**, one 30-second video or one or two 15-second **TikTok videos**.

Practice Passages:

1. Psalm 13
2. Psalm 2
3. Proverbs 16.1-9
4. James 5.1-6
5. Acts 6.1-7
6. Jonah 1.1-16
7. Mark 12.28-34
8. Colossians 3.1-17
9. 1 Thessalonians 1.2-10
10. Hebrews 2.14-18