



Week 2

BIBLICAL PREACHING & TEACHING: The Big Idea

Assigned Reading: Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 4th ed., chap. 2, "What's the Big Idea?"

Lesson Objectives:

- Explain why faithful biblical preaching and teaching must communicate the central idea of the biblical text.
- Identify the subject, complement, and Big Idea of a passage.
- Distinguish a broad topic from a specific subject.
- Distinguish the main assertion of a passage from supporting material.
- Form a preliminary Big Idea from a biblical text and defend it from the passage.

Introduction — What are you trying to say?

- Have you ever heard a sermon and walked away thinking, "What were they talking about?"
- What makes a message easy or difficult to summarize?
- Suppose someone leaves a sermon and says, "There were a lot of good things in it, but I'm not sure what the message was about."
 - What might have happened?
 - Can a sermon contain true doctrine, good illustrations, applications, and Bible verses and still lack clarity?
- When you teach or preach, what is the one major truth you want them walking away with? Why is that important to establish?
- Week 1 established that the biblical text must govern the message and first govern the messenger. Week 2 asks the next question: What does the text actually say? A passage contains many details, but those details normally work together to communicate a controlling thought.
- Robinson calls that controlling truth the _____. Others may refer to it as the "central idea." The goal this week is not merely to learn the terminology, but to learn to see the author's central idea in the text and begin expressing it clearly.
- **Key Principle:** Clarity in the pulpit begins with clarity in the study.

I. The Importance of the Big Idea

A. Biblical Preaching Must Communicate the _____ Idea

1. If the text governs the message, the preacher cannot merely ask, "What true things can I say from this passage?" He must ask, "What is the biblical author saying through this passage?" That is the difference between using Scripture as a resource for our ideas and allowing Scripture to be the source and governor of the message.
2. Biblical preaching fundamentally requires that preachers transmit what the original author intended to communicate, not merely extract doctrinal content from the text.

3. Donald G. McDougall – *“It must be emphasized that the expositor does not “make” a message out of a passage. Rather, he interacts with the contextual material until the message of the author emerges.”*¹
4. Which question is more likely to produce a text-driven sermon, and why?
 - a. “What can I preach from this passage?”
 - b. “What is the author saying through this passage?”

B. Every Detail Matters, but Every Detail Is Not the _____ Point

1. A biblical passage may contain several statements, commands, explanations, reasons, illustrations, or contrasts. Our task is to determine how those parts relate to one another and which statement controls the others.
2. A key question to ask is: Which statement are the other statements explaining, supporting, proving, qualifying, illustrating, or applying?
3. A helpful test is to mentally remove each statement. If a supporting statement is removed, the main thought may lose important support but can still stand. If the controlling statement is removed, the paragraph loses the statement that organizes the rest.
4. Example:
 - a. **Read 1 John 2:15–17**
 - b. Underline the statement you believe controls the paragraph (for example, if you had to reduce the paragraph to one command, what would it be?)
 - c. Circle the phrases that explain or support that statement.

1 John 2:15–17 — ¹⁵ *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* ¹⁶ *For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world.* ¹⁷ *And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*

- d. A sermon on “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” may contain biblical truth, but if those phrases replace “Do not love the world” as the controlling emphasis, the sermon no longer mirrors the author’s emphasis.
5. Remember, everything in the text matters, but everything in the text is not the main point.

C. The Big Idea Gives Unity to the Message

1. The Big Idea gives the message a clear target. The observations, reasons, explanations, contrasts, and examples in the passage should not become unrelated sermon ideas; they should help us understand and develop the author’s controlling thought. Like arrows aimed at a bullseye, the parts of the passage should point toward the same central truth.
2. What happens to explanation, illustration, application, and even the outline if the preacher is not clear about the passage’s central idea?
3. Robinson – “Sermons seldom fail because they have too many ideas; more often they fail because they deal with too many unrelated ideas.”²

¹ Donald G. McDougall, “Central Ideas, Outlines, and Titles,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992), 227.

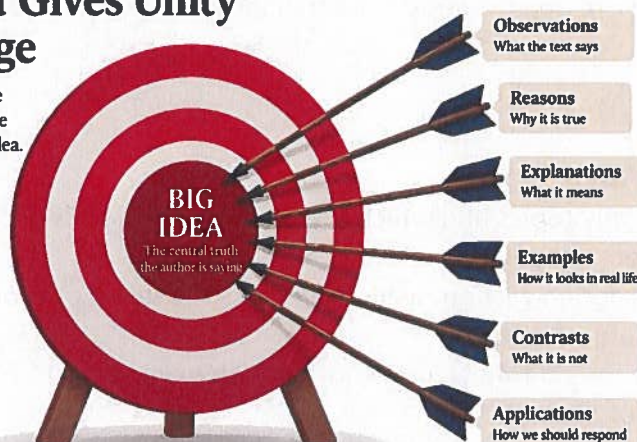
² Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, Fourth Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2025), 16.

The Big Idea Gives Unity to the Message

Just as arrows aim for the same center, every part of the passage points to and supports the Big Idea.

"Let all your arrows hit the mark."

Psalm 127:4

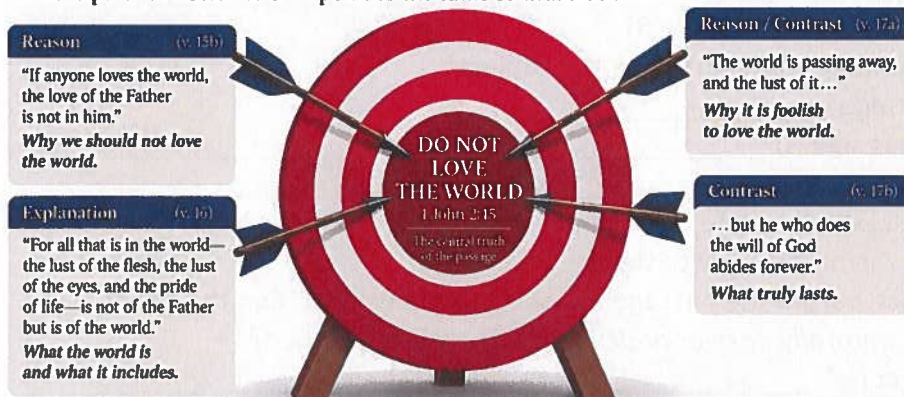


Every observation, reason, explanation, example, contrast, and application should hit the same target—the Big Idea.

"A sermon should be a bullet, not buckshot. Ideally, each sermon is the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture."¹

One Passage. One Message.

All the parts of 1 John 2:15–17 point to the same central truth.



Every part of the passage helps us understand and develop the author's main message.

Observations, reasons, explanations, and contrasts are not separate messages; they are supporting arrows that point to the same target.

D. Robinson describes an idea as a complete thought. A complete thought says something about something. He therefore identifies two basic parts

SUBJECT	+ COMPLEMENT	= BIG IDEA
- What is the author talking about. - The subject can always be stated as a question. ³	What is the author saying about it?	The complete thought of the passage

E. Practice:

1. Identify the subject and complement in each statement:

- "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."
- "Faith without works is dead."
- "The wages of sin is death."

³ Ibid., 24.

- F. A paragraph or larger textual unit is more difficult because the author may develop the thought through several sentences, commands, reasons, contrasts, illustrations, or explanations. But the basic questions remain the same.

II. Identifying the Subject

A. The Subject is more than a _____.

1. Which of these are only topics and which are complete subjects?
 - a. Wisdom (subject or topic)
 - b. How believers obtain wisdom while facing trials (subject or topic)
 - c. Forgiveness (subject or topic)
 - d. Why believers should forgive one another (subject or topic)
 - e. Faith (subject or topic)
 - f. How Abraham's faith responded when God's promise appeared threatened (subject or topic)

B. Application: James 1

1. Read James 1:5-8
 - a. What is the subject?
 2. Now read James 1:1-4 – what is the context leading up to verse 5?
 3. What is the need that appears in verse 5?
 4. How does the surrounding context narrow the subject?
 5. The **topic** of this passage is _____
 6. The **subject of the passage** is: _____
 7. The surrounding context helps determine what kind of wisdom James has in view. Context helps us move from the broad topic to the specific subject.
- C. Test the subject against each part of the passage by asking the question, "*Can the major statements of the passage naturally answer or develop this subject question?*"
1. The **proposed subject** is "_____
 - a. Does verse 5 address obtaining wisdom?
 - b. Does verse 6 address obtaining wisdom?
 - c. Does verse 7-8 address obtaining wisdom?
 2. A good subject should account for the major material in the passage without leaving significant statements unexplained.
 3. Also, the subject does not have to contain everything the passage says. The complement will complete the author's thought by answering what the author says about the subject.

III. Identifying the Complement

A. The complement completes the subject.

1. The subject identifies what the author is talking about. The complement identifies what the author is saying about the subject.
2. Robinson's definition of a complement: **Complement**—the answer to the question, "What exactly am I saying about what I'm talking about?"⁴
3. Another simple way to think about it:

⁴ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 26.

- a. **Subject = the question the passage is addressing.**
 - b. **Complement = the answer the passage gives to that question.**
- 4. The complement cannot be determined apart from the subject. Once the subject has been identified, return to the passage and ask: **What answer does the author give to this subject question?**
- B. **Application – James 1:5-8**
 - 1. The subject is: **How can believers obtain wisdom amid trials**
 - 2. **What is the answer to that question that James gives?**
 - a. Underline the answer in: **James 1:5** — ⁵ *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.*
 - b. Underline the important qualification given in verse 6: **James 1:6** — ⁶ *But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.*
 - c. What do verses 7-8 add?
 - d. So what is the complement? _____
 - e. **Put the Subject and Complement Together**
 - i. **Subject (question):** How can believers obtain wisdom amid trials?
 - ii. **Complement (answer):** By asking God for it in faith.
 - f. The subject asks the question; the complement gives the author's answer. Together they form the **Big Idea**.
 - g. **Big Idea: Believers can obtain wisdom amid trials by asking God for it in faith.**
 - h. Notice the progression:
 - i. **Topic:** Wisdom
 - ii. **Subject:** How can believers obtain wisdom amid trials?
 - iii. **Complement:** By asking God for it in faith.
 - iv. **Big Idea:** Believers can obtain wisdom amid trials by asking God for it in faith.

IV. Identifying the Big Idea

A. The Big Idea Joins the Subject and Complement.

- 1. Once the subject and complement have been identified, bring them together into one complete statement.

Subject + Complement = Big Idea

- 2. The Big Idea states, in one sentence, the central thought the author communicates in the passage.
 - a. It is more than the topic (wisdom).
 - b. It is more than the subject (How can believers obtain wisdom amid trials?)
 - c. It expresses the author's complete thought about the subject.
 - d. Daniel Akin calls it the main idea: *"The main idea of the text is the single unit of thought that binds together and gives meaning to all the particulars of a text....It should always be in the form of a full grammatical sentence, and be stated clearly and concisely. It places a laser beam focus on (1) what the author is talking about and (2) what the author is saying about what he is talking about."*⁵

B. How to test the Big Idea?

⁵ Daniel L. Akin, "Introduction," in *Engaging Exposition: A 3-D Approach to Preaching* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011), 130.

1. Once you have stated the Big Idea, return to the text and ask: ***How do the major parts of the passage relate to this idea?***
 - a. **James 1:5–8 - Big Idea:** *Wisdom amid trials is obtained by asking God for it in faith.*
 - i. v. 5 — Gives the instruction: *Ask God for wisdom.*
 - ii. v. 6 — Qualifies the instruction: *Ask in faith, without doubting.*
 - iii. vv. 7–8 — Reinforces the qualification: *The doubting, double-minded person should not expect to receive.*
 - b. **Key Principle:** If you cannot explain how the major parts of the passage relate to the proposed Big Idea, you may not yet have accurately identified the author's idea.
 - c. **Practical Test:** If significant material in the passage does not fit under, support, explain, qualify, or develop your proposed Big Idea, rework the Big Idea.
 2. **Incorporate into the “Target” illustration:** The Big Idea is the bullseye, and the major parts of the passage are the arrows pointing toward and developing that central idea.
 - a. What is the “bullseye” – the Big Idea = *Wisdom amid trials is obtained by asking God for it in faith.*
 - b. Arrow – v. 5 – Instruction: Ask God for wisdom
 - c. Arrow – v. 6 – Qualifications: Ask in faith without doubting.
 - d. Arrow – v. 7–8 – Warning – The doubter should not expect to receive.
 - e. Note: Every arrow should hit the same target. If the major parts of the passage do not point toward and develop your proposed Big Idea, you may have identified the wrong target.
- C. Practice passage to discover the Big Idea: Read Mark 4:35–41**
1. What broad topic is Mark discussing?
 2. Identify the subject
 3. Possible Subject (put in a question form): Why should the disciples trust Jesus in a fearful circumstance?
 4. Identify the Complement (what is the author saying about it? Answer the question the subject presents):
 5. **Subject:** Why should the disciples trust Jesus in fearful circumstances?
 6. **Complement:** Because Jesus possesses sovereign authority even over the wind and the sea.
 7. **Big Idea:** The disciples should trust Jesus in fearful circumstances because He possesses sovereign authority over creation.
 8. Test it by asking how the major parts of the passage relate to this idea.
 - a. vv. 35–38 — The crisis exposes the disciples’ fear and questions their confidence in Jesus.
 - b. vv. 39–40 — Jesus demonstrates His authority over the storm and confronts their fear and lack of faith.
 - c. v. 41 — The disciples respond with awe and ask the climactic question: “Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!”
 9. Discussion: Why would someone teaching from this passage, “Jesus will calm every storm in your life” fail to express the Big Idea of this passage? Because the passage does not promise that Jesus will remove every difficult circumstance. The narrative reveals who Jesus is—One with authority over creation, and exposes the disciples’ need to trust Him.
- D. Student Practice** - Work in groups of two. **Read Colossians 3:1–4** and work through the process without being given the answer first.
1. Topic: _____

2. Subject — What specific question is the passage addressing? _____
3. Complement — What answer does the passage give to that question? _____
4. Big Idea: _____
5. Defend your Big Idea — How do the major parts of the passage relate to it? Do the other verses support the Big Idea?

V. Common Mistakes

- As you work from the biblical text toward its Big Idea, several common mistakes can lead you away from the author's intended meaning.

A. Building a sermon on the topic instead of the subject.

1. A topic tells us generally **what the passage is about**, but it does not tell us **what the author is saying about it**.
2. What may happen if a preacher focuses on "wisdom" or perhaps even "prayer" as the subject of James 1:5-8? What would they be missing?

B. Bringing your own idea to the text.

1. It is possible to begin with something we want to preach and then use a biblical passage simply as support for our idea.
2. What is the difference between asking, "**What can I preach from this passage?**" and "**What is the author saying in this passage?**"

C. Making a supporting detail the main idea.

1. Every detail of the passage matters, but not every detail is the main point. Some statements explain, support, qualify, illustrate, or develop the controlling thought.
2. In 1 John 2:15-17, what could happen if we built the message around "**the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life**" rather than John's controlling command, "**Do not love the world**"?

D. Finding several unrelated Big Ideas.

1. A passage may contain several truths, commands, reasons, contrasts, or illustrations, but these normally work together within the unit of thought.
2. If you identify three or four "Big Ideas" from a short passage, what question should you ask?

E. Making the Big Idea too general.

1. A statement may be **biblically true** without accurately expressing the particular idea of the passage.
2. What is wrong with identifying the Big Idea of James 1:5-8 as simply "**God gives wisdom**"?

F. Confusing an implication or application with the Big Idea.

1. A passage may imply several true theological conclusions and lead to many legitimate applications, but we must first determine **what the author is actually saying**.
2. Consider Colossians 3:1-4: "**True believers will have different priorities.**"
3. Is that a biblical truth that can be drawn from the passage? **Yes**. But is that precisely Paul's assertion in the passage?

G. Key Principle: Before asking "**What truth can I draw from this text?**" make sure you can answer "**What is the author saying in this text?**"

VI. FINAL REVIEW

- A. What is the topic? The broad area the passage addresses.
- B. What is the subject? The specific question the author is addressing: What is the author talking about?
- C. What is the complement? The author's answer to the subject question: What is the author saying about what he is talking about?
- D. What is the Big Idea? The complete thought formed by bringing the subject and complement together.
- E. SUBJECT + COMPLEMENT = BIG IDEA
- F. How do I know whether I have identified the Big Idea accurately? Return to the text and ask: How do the major parts of the passage relate to and develop this idea?
- G. If significant material does not fit, explain, support, qualify, or develop the proposed Big Idea, reconsider the Big Idea.

SUMMARY

- Biblical preaching does not begin by asking, “What do I want to say?” It begins by asking, “What is the biblical author saying?”
- The goal is not merely to find a biblical topic or several true statements. The goal is to identify and clearly state the **central thought the author communicates through the passage. Clarity in the pulpit begins with clarity in the study.**

Today's Assignments:

- Quiz 2 — Quiz over the assigned reading and Week 2 handout.

Due for next class: (Saturday, Sept. 26th, 9:30 a.m.)

- Robinson, Chapter 3: “Tools of the Trade”
- Bring the “Big Idea Worksheet” completed for Week 3.

Bibliography

- Akin, Daniel L. “Introduction.” In *Engaging Exposition: A 3-D Approach to Preaching*, by Daniel L. Akin, Bill Curtis, and Stephen Rummage. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2011.
- McDougall, Donald G. “Central Ideas, Outlines, and Titles.” In *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, edited by John MacArthur Jr. and The Master’s Seminary Faculty. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992.
- Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. 4th ed. Revised by Scott Wenig. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2025.

Biblical Message Project – Big Idea Worksheet

Due Week 3 — 30 Points

Name: _____ Passage: _____

Genesis 12:1-7; Joshua 1:5-9; Psalms 1:1-6; Psalm 23:1-6; Proverbs 3:5-8; Matthew 5:13-18; Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 10:38-42; John 15:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-32; Philippians 2:1-5; Philippians 4:5-13

1. Passage Selection — 5 points

Select an appropriate, instructor-approved biblical passage.

2. Topic — Preparation

In one or two words, what is the broad topic of the passage?

Topic: _____

3. Subject — 5 points

What specifically is the author talking about? State the subject as a complete question that arises from the passage.

4. Complement — 5 points

What does the author say about the subject? Answer the question raised by your subject.

5. Big Idea — 10 points

Bring the subject and complement together into one clear, complete sentence that expresses the central thought of the passage.

SUBJECT + COMPLEMENT = BIG IDEA

6. Textual Support — 5 points

List brief observations in the surrounding verses that show how the major parts of the passage support, explain, qualify, or develop your proposed Big Idea.

Verse(s)	Observation
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_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Before You Submit

- ☐ Does my subject go beyond a broad topic?
- ☐ Does my complement actually answer my subject question?
- ☐ Does my Big Idea combine the subject and complement into one complete thought?
- ☐ Can I show from the passage where this Big Idea comes from?
- ☐ Do the major parts of the passage point toward and develop the same central idea?

Remember: This is a preliminary Big Idea. Bring this completed worksheet to Week 3. We will use the tools of biblical study to test, refine, and, if necessary, correct it.

