

Preparing for a lecture,

...a talk or a sermon !



These thoughts are about what helps me get an order in what I have to give, when I am preparing a sermon or lecture. It helps me actually think through who I am speaking to and why. The method I describe below stimulates me to ask the Lord for help, not only in getting the subject matter together, but specifically thinking and praying about the listeners - their situation, their needs and what they are to gain by hearing what God gives me to say. I use this method for everything, whether talking about salvation, teaching a Bible theme, talking to men about management or the use of time - it works for every type of talk or lecture, especially the kind of talk that needs something written down before you start. It works for me, but I am sure that it does not work for everyone, because we do not all think in the same way. However, the principles involved are more important than the actual method described.

This way up - follow me!

As I prepare, I think of a picture of group of sheep at the bottom of a mountain cliff, unable to get to the juicy pastures further up the mountain. The sheep are the listeners, and the Lord is the shepherd, who will help the sheep get to the pasture using the words he gives me. There is a way to get there, by small increments up a mountain path, not too steep, going around the mountain, until the pasture is reached. The sheep do not know -

1. that there is pasture up the mountain
2. the way to get there.

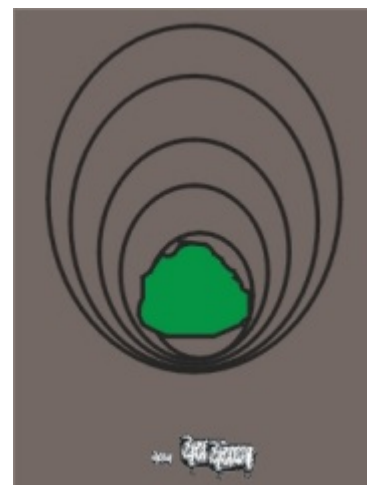
That is what the shepherd is there for, and that is why you are being used by him in speaking out his message. Interestingly, my father-in-law, who is a retired farmer, says that grass for sheep is better higher up, because it grows less tall. Sheep can eat short grass, whereas the taller grass lower down is not suitable for them.



The white objects on the right are sheep!

The next picture is showing the same, but looking down from above, with circles representing the increasing height of the mountain - with the steep part in the lower part of the picture (below the grass in the diagram):

This picture is then the invisible basis for the A5 page that I use for my main notes, which are in short form (notes and short memory jogs). Actually, I do not write full sentences and read my notes out loud, because when I do I lose my place and block out what the Lord is moving in my heart. So this keeps me spontaneous and dependent on him and not on the paper.

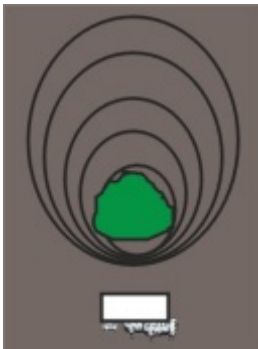


Any longer explanations or quotes that belong to the lecture receive a reference number on the front and appear in full at the back of the page or on an extra sheet. Slides or overhead-projector-foils can also be

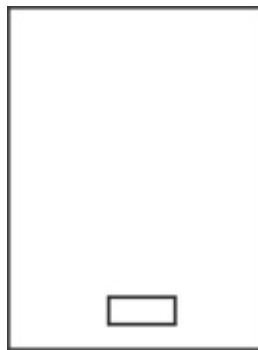
given a number. I will now use this plan to explain the way I prepare a talk, but the picture above will eventually no longer be there. Instead, the only thing reminding us of this picture will be a path going up the mountain to where the grass was in the original picture. As yet, the path is not yet visible. Keep reading if you don't understand what I am talking about - it will hopefully come clear on the 10th time you read this!!

The Start Box

In order to help me pick up the people from where they are, I write, in a little box on my blank A5 sheet, a description of their situation. In a pictorial comparison, this could be "dry desert" as compared to grass, or if we have already begun our journey, it could be a lower stage of green grass, but now we need to go a little higher! The following depicts this box in which I write the description. Here first as the "invisible picture" that I imagine on the page:



Here is what I actually draw on a blank A5 page:



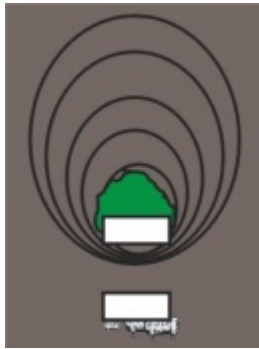
In practice this means that what I write in this little box (the "start box") is a clear, short description of the reality of the listener's position. Usually it is a summary of what I know of their spiritual state, or of the practical implications of their lack of knowledge, or the wrong fruit or lack of fruit in their present state. The box may however contain something else instead, for example a question that was asked, or a specific way of thinking that needs correcting. The importance of this first step is as follows: if we do not understand our target audience - who they are, what they know and how they are thinking, we can completely miss communicating the message correctly.

Sometimes, I do not have this description clearly until I have finished everything else that I have in my heart to write down. If I then think through what the implications of the message are, I can compare this with whatever little I know of the listeners i.e. with the listeners actual present application, or their present understanding of the message before they hear. So that means, I fill in this box at the end. Sometimes I am not clear where the listeners are, but then I work backwards from the target (see next paragraph). In this case I write in the "start box" the opposite of the target we are aiming for. It is at this moment I can begin to put into words where the people are and why I am giving them the message (if they are not at this point, then it is the wrong message for them, because they have already reached the target!!)

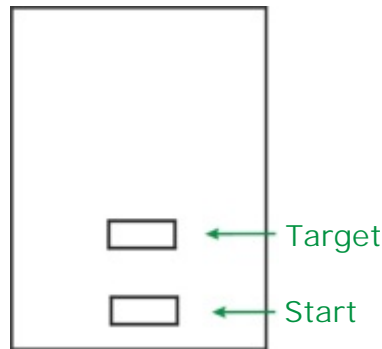
The Target Box

We now leave the "start box" and go to the next stage which is to draw another box, representing the target that we need to get to (pictorially, the juicy pasture!). Usually I fill this in at the beginning after the start box, but it can be that it gets filled in at the end of my preparation. In this box you could write the benefits for your listeners of being able to understand the message, once you have told them. Or you could take what you have written in the lower box and put the opposite in the "target box". If you have only one lecture, then you need to write the final place where you hope the people will arrive once they understand your message. If it is several lectures, you need to write where that particular lecture is to take them to. I do not only think of the acquired knowledge that these people need, but seek to have vision how the people will become - how they will be different in their behaviour or decision-making after hearing the message, if they hear and respond that is! What do I hope that they will do differently after hearing the message than at this present moment?

The Target Box is seen here on the grass:



and on the A5 sheet in this way:

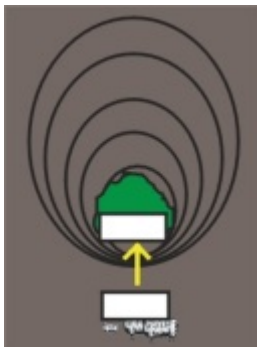


Change of heart and actions required

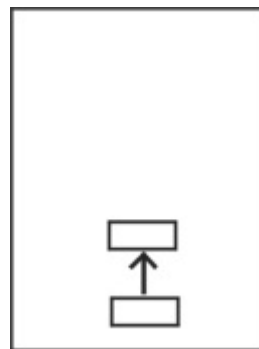
Preaching is, in fact, describing two states - where the listener is, and where he or she ought to be. Preaching not only seeks to motivate the listener to desire or wish that he will arrive at that target, but also just as importantly,

1. preaching calls upon the listeners for a verdict upon their own state and
2. preaching gives the listener opportunity to make the decision that will begin the move to the target.

This difference between the two states, as well as the fact that a move is required to leave the start position and arrive at the target, is represented in our invisible picture as follows:



and on the A5 sheet in this way:



Teaching, on the other hand, can only truly happen when the listener has decided to make the move for the target. Yet at the moment of decision, the destination is impossible (like a cliff). Indeed, it is only possible through Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. Teaching is the description of the incremental decisions/ behavioural changes which eventually lead us to the destination step by step - it is the mountain path around the mountain.

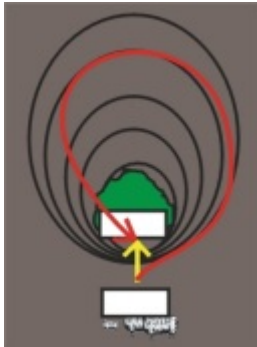
According to the listener's state, the talk is either more preaching (to bring to a point of decision to go for the target) or more teaching (to explain the incremental changes and the background to the decisions necessary on the way up to the target). Depending on the listeners, you may need to begin with a challenge, or end with the challenge. Usually, if the listeners know nothing of the subject, they need the kind of challenge which concentrates on the goal. If, however, they know something of the subject, but are requiring steps to get there, the challenge usually at the end, is to remind people where they actually are. This is because we often live with an ideal picture of ourselves. The challenge is also necessary to show that decisions and moves forward (steps) must be made on the issues involved.

The Lord himself leads me

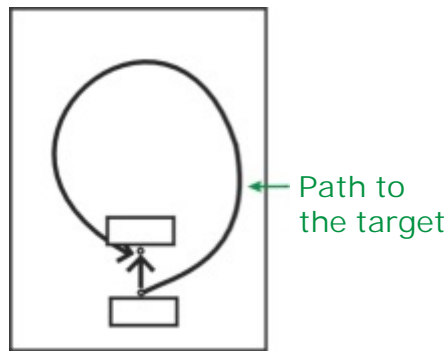
Now we come to the steps involved, which is about taking a path around the mountain, gradually getting higher and higher up. [Psalm 23:2](#) says: "He leads me beside quiet waters". The word here translated "leads" is "Nahal" in the original and means the following:

Nahal: *“to lead, give rest, lead with care, guide to a watering place or station, cause to rest, bring to a station or place of rest, guide, refresh.”*

So we have our next stage in preparing a talk, which is to work out the route our talk is going to take. With this comes the stages along the way to reach our destination. Just to remind you, that destination is either a new understanding or, better still, a decision based on the message and understanding reached. First let us draw in the path in our imaginary picture:



and now on the actual A5 page we are using:



I always use this same pattern. I find it gives me confidence to know where to find my next point on the paper, because I always prepare the message in the same way. Just a practical note here about how I do it: I always use a pencil (if working by hand) so that I can make lots of changes as required. If you prefer to do your preparation on computer, which I do if I want my notes to be particularly precise and readable, you may want to use a template. I have made one using Microsoft Publisher.

You will see in the diagram that I have added two points for the exact positions of start and target- this is only a design feature - the arrow could just as easily arrive at the target box itself. Feel free to use the ideas presented in whatever way you want and change them to suit you.

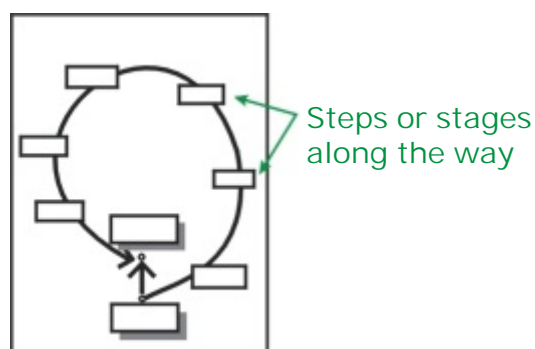
Steps or stages on the way

Two precise usages of this word Nahal are helpful in the context of a shepherd's work:

to refresh (with food)

to journey by stations or stages

Along the route there must be clear intermediate goals (= stages) on the way worked out by the shepherd who knows the path and is leading the sheep up a way they have not gone before. On the other hand some of the sheep may know the way, but the shepherd needs to remind them of it. The shepherd (i.e. the speaker) has to avoid pitfalls (a precipice) and maybe point these out on the way. He himself must not be careless, but keep to what he knows, rather than speculate. He must keep to the path that will lead to the goal. So the path, or in our case, the talk, consists of stages/ stations/ stopping places - our points on the way during the talk. They can be whatever is required to reach the correct destination safely and in "good health" (e.g. still water, to take a moment to drink and be refreshed). The stages must help the listener to keep moving with you, without getting lost in the process (or dropping off to sleep!). These steps/ stages /stations may be the various points of understanding required. Or they may be the various steps in a decision making process, or the individual verses in a passage under study, or various key arguments to bring conviction or convincement, with the corresponding Scripture verses (written next to the point) etc.

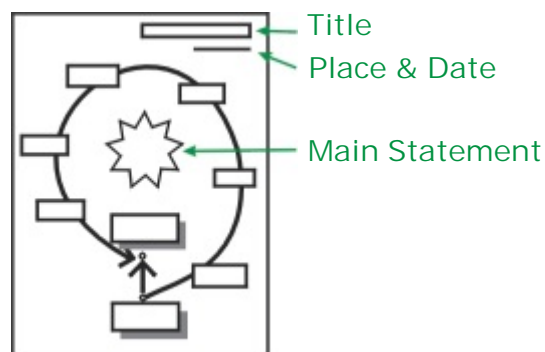


We need to check through whether these stages are really those which will lead to the final goal we know the listener must be brought to. We need to be careful that we do not go off-track and begin speaking about our favourite "hobby-horses" - things we like to talk about, but which are not fully relevant to the theme or topic being presented.

The less time we have for our talk, the more time we need to invest into every minute of it and ensure we keep on track. If we have more time and the listeners also have much time, it does not matter if we drift off the point. However it is good practice to keep to the point as a matter of courtesy and thankfulness to the listener for the time they have given to hear you. Besides this, every point of the talk needs to build on the one before, just like stages in a journey, so that you actually make forward progress. It will not only get you there, it will also keep the attention of the listener.

The main statement

In order not to lose sight of the main statement or message, I put this in the centre of the picture. This may be one important sentence that must be said (and perhaps repeated several times along the way), or the main point that I want the people to go away remembering, or it may be the point of issue being discussed etc. In the following diagram, I will also show you where I write the official title of the talk, as well as where I write the place and date, so that I can file this page for later reference. It also helps to remember what the page is about, if I begin preparing months before the talk and later find it again half finished!! I underline the word in the title that I think is the key word and file the page under that word.



Inform listener of Progress

Once the talk is underway, it can be very helpful for the listener if these stages are clearly outlined to him or her as being separate stages during the talk. It helps the listener to know where we have been and where we are going in the passing minutes of the talk. The climb up the hill normally gets steeper towards the end, but the concentration wavers after some minutes, near the beginning. The listener may have lost a few minutes while he or she watched a mosquito zoom around. Or they were distracted by someone coughing, or were still thinking about the last point while you had moved on. Therefore it helps to be informed of the structure of the talk so as to catch up, or be prepared in advance and recognise the "landscape". This is especially so if the talk is more than just five minutes on one subject. So that the listener can grasp the structure of what is about to be said, I sometimes say the steps in advance, or show them on an overhead projector slide or blackboard (not more than four or five points) and/or look back at them in outline form as the talk progresses e.g. "In my introduction I talked about my experience in ... and then I went on the talk about the first point, which is...following which we looked at the second point, the.... I now come to the third point and we are more than half way through. The third point is"

I may have more steps written down for me, but should only outline the most important ones, so as not to overload the listener with details he does not find helpful. Whether I go into this type of backward review and/or forward overview depends very much on the type of listener I have, how much time I have (the longer it is, the more likely the listener will 'lose the thread') and it also depends on how complex the subject matter is. The more complex the arguments or connections between various points along the way, the more we, the listener, need help from the speaker to keep us with him on the track.

Notes for each stage

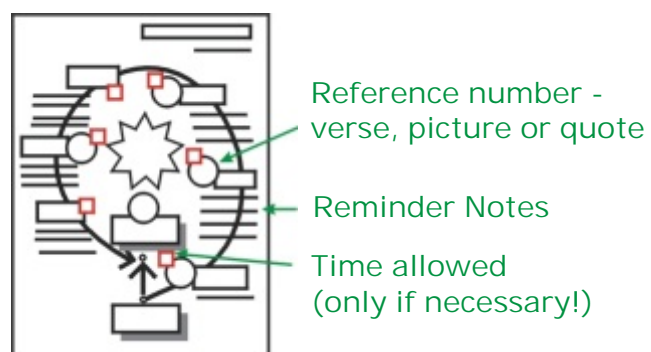
Just as a shepherd will remember the waterfall at point X and the danger of rocks falling at point Y, so we need to write short notes at each stage on our paper, to jog our memory as to what we felt was important to say about each stage. Whereas each stage box only has a few words in it (usually between 1 and 6 key words), we can find a little space in close proximity to that box (above or beneath) to write a little more detail - but still in short form. If we have a quote or a picture to go with what we are saying (e.g. one or more overhead slides for that point), we give them a reference number. Then this same number is written on another page (or overleaf) together with the quote (or the full Bible verse if you prefer not to have to look it up).

This method of note-making means that your notes are simply there for reference and as a memory jog, not for reading out to the listeners, unless you have a particular sentence with carefully selected words. If you put the Scripture verses that come with that stage next to the larger "stage" box, you can find what verses you wanted to read very quickly with a glance down to your notes...but always double check that you have written the correct verses and that you can read your writing!!! Actually, if I have prepared the sermon the day or week before, I read over the verses again using the final notes, not only to check them, but to let them speak freshly to my spirit.

If you are using pictures (photo-slides or overhead foils), it is useful to have a little diagram (or miniature) of the picture on another piece of paper, together with its reference number. This is especially useful if you have asked someone else to operate the projector. In this way you can remind yourself what the next picture looks like and not have to wait until it appears before you start talking about it. In addition, you can already work out if you want to skip it, if you are under time pressure.

Timing

If you know you will be under time pressure, write in a coloured box (at the side of each stage) how long you should have for each point. Remember, we spend at least one and half times as much as we think it will take. Then, if your talk is being interpreted, double this time! You will realise that you can say much less than you first thought, which means you have to go back over each point and cross out everything that does not lead to the target. As already said, it is best to work with pencil. Before you start talking, look at the clock and make a mental note of the time when you should be finishing according to amount of time you have been given. If you reach the end of your time limit - and you are not in charge, always ask if you think you could use more time effectively (but only if the listeners are on the edge of their seats). Some people find it very difficult to concentrate when they know that you are over the allowed time limit - even if it is not their responsibility!



Working with a time limit needs a lot of discipline with the method I am describing. However, the effect of having less in terms of written notes, together with the realisation that I have a lot to say under time pressure, has the following effect on me. It causes me to narrow down what I am going to say to the most important points, which means I think and pray over them often during the preparation time. Because the wording is not fixed on a paper, I can then think through how I can say each point the best. This includes listening and watching out for happenings or sayings on the day of the talk, or in the days beforehand, that will help me bring the point across in a much more relevant way, with no need for long explanations. This includes taking hold of what a previous speaker has just said.

Some advantages of this method

Eye Contact

By keeping the notes to the minimum, you are able to look into the faces of the listeners and speak from your heart without losing your place in pages of written notes. Remember that communication is as much about body language as it is about words. You need to see your listeners' faces and they need to see yours.

Spontaneity & Flexibility

Spontaneity is difficult to capture in regular notes. Spontaneity makes for increased interest. With the main stages and only short notes written down, you are much more flexible if the following things happen: 1. The previous speaker takes too much time or 2. the meeting starts late and you find that you have much less time to speak than you were first told. All you do, is decide whether you are going to a) speak about all of the points, but much more briefly b) speak about one main point on the path more intensively and leave out or only mention the others c) speak only about the difference between the starting point (start box) and the target (target box) i.e. you decide to "preach" instead of "teach". You can also speed up in this same way at any stage in the proceedings, if you discover that you underestimated how much time it would take to cover the various stages, or if you felt the Holy Spirit leading you to speak about one of the other points in more detail.

Continuing the talk later

If you do not finish all you wanted to say, this method is great for letting you be flexible enough to finish the talk another time - you can say the points that you are going to cover next time just as you finish, so that the listeners are already thinking them through. And when you start again the next time (whether the same day, or the next day, week or month) you have all the points that have been covered written clearly in short form. You can read out these points to remind the listeners quickly of what was covered on the previous talk. This helps them remember. Actually I often ask the listeners about the points, which helps them remember longer, as well as show me what they have retained and understood. There may be points that you need to go over before you move on. If I have time (and energy!), I will rewrite the notes if I have spoken on half the stages and need to continue another time. Not only does this help it to be fresher in my mind. It also means that I can take any slight changes in course that are necessary. This is especially where I have detected lack of understanding, or where I felt that I did not explain something well and need to explain it more.

I have sometimes discovered during the preparation stage, that each stage or step of what I had thought would be part of one talk are actually needing separate talks for each stage. This meant rewriting the whole thing, starting with a new sheet of paper for the first step and keeping my original paper as the plan for a series of lectures or sermons. It is a mistake to give the listeners too much to absorb in one go. Of course - some people absorb more, depending on their motivation, so "too much" is a variable quantity which varies from group to group. Do not put all the responsibility for absorption on the listener. You must bear the responsibility of being aware of how much is too much - which is why a flexible system of notes like this is so helpful: 1. You are looking at the listeners and will be aware of their feedback (body language) - I do not mean being afraid of their faces, but being sensitive to their listening potential 2. You can respond to what you are feeling and seeing in your listeners and still complete the delivery of the full message (e.g. by either shortening the talk, or giving more examples or illustrations and less dry facts, or telling the Bible story rather than reading many verses).

Continued listening to the Holy Spirit

Most importantly for the believer in our Lord Jesus, this method of preparing notes gives continued room for the Holy Spirit to speak into your heart as you are speaking. He may then give you words to say that you did not think of or realise were important when you were preparing. The very fact that you do not have everything already written helps you, if you desire this, to keep yourself dependent on the Lord and not on your paper and your previous preparation. The Holy Spirit knows that you need to keep to the topic and the time limit you are under. Your spirit is under your control - you are not speaking on automatic. Therefore you will find that you and the Lord have the opportunity to continue working together, even as you speak. Your preparation was made with the Holy Spirit's prompting, and now you are opening your mouth, still under his prompting. You

are very much aware of your need for his help, because you are asking Him to express through you what the Lord has put in your heart for the hearts of your listeners.

Conclusion

My hope is that this way of preparing a lecture will spur you on to think creatively, as well as becoming even more clear about the goal you are heading for as you speak - a change in the heart attitudes and in the actions of the listeners. Your desire is to clearly present the very points that will give life change - making all the difference to their lives and the lives of others. Meanwhile, we know that as we prepare, God does the rest. Most of all, let us trust in God's power to use us by His great grace for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.



I think pencil and paper is the best. However, some of us are unable to read our own writing! If you know the computer programme Microsoft "Publisher" (*.pub), you may want to try using a template to write notes with the method described. It is available (free) from: www.tssi.ch/lectureprep_template.html

Underneath is a reduced size picture of a sermon prepared using the "lectureprep" method. You can download it in full size (A5, shown on A4 page, Adobe Acrobat Reader File, *.pdf) from internet:

www.tssi.ch/lectureprep_example.html

