

## Some Not-So-Subtle Sermon Suggestions

By Steve Schmutzer

[Steve's Website](#)   [Contact Steve](#)   [Steve's Article Podcast](#)   [Steve's Daniel Class Podcast](#)

According to a recent “Twitter survey,” the average length of a sermon anymore is about 36 minutes. I said “average.” That means roughly half of the sermons every Sunday are shorter than that. It’s fast food for the frenzied flock.

I suppose I could be persuaded to accept those parameters more if those 36 minutes were filled with substance and pith. You know – the “chewy stuff.” I need those elements that make me think, that convict me, that expand my view of God, that shake me to my core, that nourish my faith, that compel an honest look in the mirror, and that reinforce truth “I can hang my hat on.”

I’m talking about meat!

Does anyone else see this situation the same way I do? I’m concerned that more congregants share my views than does the average pastor or teacher.

In a curated and published list of the top 50 sermon themes of all time from *“Sharefaith Magazine,”* the milk rises to the top nearly every time. Yes, I admit this is my opinion, but I know many others that feel the same way I do. In this list, the most popular sermon themes camp on topics like peace, hope, parenting, love, community, thankfulness, joy, tithing, direction, forgiveness, marriage, and so on and so on.

Don’t get me wrong – these themes have their place. But a diet of devotionals hardly pulls off the achievements of sermons like *“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”* by Jonathan Edwards, or *“Old Time Religion”* by Billy Sunday.

I understand not everyone can preach like those guys did, but the bigger problem here is our aversion to talking about “sin” or (gasp!) calling God “angry.” Neither theme showed up on the top 50 list. As far as anything “old time” is concerned, that’s *definitely* not seeker-friendly. The church needs to be forward-thinking to be attractive to the unsaved – right? It’s no surprise “old time” wasn’t part of the top 50 hits either.

These dilemmas might be resolved if pastors and teachers preached from the Old Testament more. It’s in the first half of the Bible that some of the other attributes of God show up that we hardly acknowledge anymore.

Believe me, I thank God for His grace - but the cross doesn’t change our need to have a comprehensive Biblical view of God. The cross changes how God views us!

Unfortunately, according to the top 50, it looks like Psalms and Proverbs are the mainstays for those few times that sermons dipped their toe into the pool of the Old Testament. These books conform better to the cliché wall-plaque vignettes of truth we pop like pills whenever life gives us a spiritual headache.

The truth is our obsession with the Gospel has become seriously misguided. It has effectively vaccinated the church against properly receiving the greater body of Biblical truth. Most church leaders forget that the Gospel's roots are in the Old Testament, and as a result, they are short-circuiting the Scriptures.

When John the Baptist said, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29), that good news was based on centuries of Old Testament rituals. Paul said he was "*...set apart for the Gospel of God which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures* (Romans 1:1-2). Passages like these are clear references to the Old Testament which is the basis of how the Gospel played out "*according to the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3-5).

It's my growing conviction that today's pastors and teachers need to look to the example of yesterday's church leaders like Peter and Paul to see how they handled their sermon topics. Human nature hasn't changed from then to now, and nor has the needs of the church. The results of this exercise would surprise most seminary graduates today.

Acts chapter 2 is regarded as the start of the church - and rapidly, both Jews and Gentiles became a part of it. This was no casual development since it went against all the social mores of that day. Perhaps a good first sermon for this revolutionary situation would have been something about "Christian Community," or maybe "How to Love Your Enemies." It's a good "churchy" approach.

But Peter chose prophecy instead. That's right - he chose that "fringe stuff," that "non-essential" part of God's Word according to so many "Christians" today.

Keep in mind this was the start of all of church history. The church was brand new and it had all kinds of needs at that point, so why talk about "*the day of the Lord?*" The Bible outlines that Peter stood up, filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4), and preached a rock-solid sermon on Biblical prophecy from the Old Testament (Joel 2:28-32).

Much could be said about "why" Peter chose this approach, and apart from the basic reason that it was Holy Spirit-inspired, here are two important thoughts we might consider:

First of all, a chief goal of Peter was to call people to repentance. In the vernacular of today's church, "It's all about the Gospel." Well - it was then too.

So Peter preached on the coming judgments of Jesus Christ! He taught his listeners the prophecies of the Tribulation and he revealed God's forthcoming wrath on an unrepentant world. It was Peter's version of "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,*" and his sermon included the texts of prophecy as he reminded them of their urgent need for salvation.

Secondly, Peter reminded his audience of God's covenant relationship with Israel. Joel is a distinctly Jewish book and Peter used it to underscore God's unilateral and unconditional commitment to the Jews. Since Gentiles, too, were coming to faith, Peter employed prophecy to remind the Jews that God would keep His covenant commitments to His chosen people.

It's a sad and despicable fact that many people within the church today subscribe to the belief that God's emphasis is now only on the church, that God has somehow moved beyond the Jews, and that the promises to Israel are now intended for the church.

None of that is true! It was the prophetic Word of God that corrected that sort of thinking in Peter's time, and it is the straightforward preaching of the prophetic Scriptures that continues to remedy those heresies today.

Another example of how the prophetic Scriptures impacted a "new church" is seen in comparing the texts of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians. The new church in Thessalonica was anywhere from a few weeks to a few months old. They were every bit "babes in the faith."

When Paul taught these new believers in the Thessalonian church, he didn't feed them the pabulum of socially-acceptable "devotionals" the way most pastors and teachers feed their flocks today. Paul fed them real meat. This was stuff they might choke on as meat can do, but it *was* real food.

If you compare the content of 2 Thessalonians against the backdrop of 1 Thessalonians, you will find Paul emphasized the doctrines of the end times. This is the stuff we call "eschatology." These are the prophetic themes that many in the church today choose to mock (2 Peter 3:3-4).

The early church of Thessalonica may have been very young, and Paul may not have much time with them, but he used that time to teach them about the antichrist, the Day of the Lord, the Rapture, and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Like Peter did at the start of the church age, Paul emphasized the prophetic Word of God during this body of believers' early phase. Paul was concerned for their spiritual health and well-being, and he gave these believers a foundation to withstand apostasy (see 2 Thess. 2:5).

Peter used the prophetic Scriptures to preach repentance and to affirm the character and promises of God. Paul used prophecy to correct wrong doctrines and to encourage the young believers in their faith.

All things considered, the prophetic Scripture provide immense value to anyone who is sincere about defending the truth and growing in their faith. So let me offer some not-so-subtle suggestions for sermon themes which would directly serve to *"...equip the saints for works of ministry, to build up the body of Christ"* (Eph. 4:12).

How about a sermon series on the various texts of the Rapture? Be sure to include the Old Testament types of how God rescued His faithful from prescribed judgment on a defined population. Do a series on “the days of Noah” and drill down into the provocative question, “Why did Jesus recall *this* specific time in history as a reference point for His second coming?” (Matt. 25:31-33, Luke 17:26-27).

An excellent sermon series would present the personal benefits of studying Biblical prophecy – and you already have some hints of those here. A most eye-opening sermon series would study the role of Israel in the end times. A much-needed emphasis for *that* series should outline how the Bible presents the church and Israel as two different entities.

If an expository approach is more your style, take a deep dive into Romans chapters 9-11, and don’t yield to any pressures to take a non-literal approach! That’s an easy escape from the truth. For a topical angle, consider studying the theme of the Nephilim from Genesis to Revelation. Believe me, it’s there! It explains so much about why certain things in the Bible are presented the way they are.

There are so many options for teaching and preaching the prophetic Word of God, and people are hungry to understand what is coming and what God has planned. The theme of Biblical prophecy endures as a vital part of God’s revelation to His church today just as it was in earlier times. Churches which discount it are willfully suppressing God’s best intentions for us.