

Headlines and Headliners

A Creative Way to Summarize Biblical Truths

by Ronald G. Davis

Some Bible texts, especially from narrative historical sections, can lead to a “Big News” series of studies, focusing on politicians, pundits, prophets, and patrons. Death and destruction, failure and foolishness, fill the pages of Scripture. Had there been printing presses and journalists, the headlines would have been bold and blaring. Such were the times of the days of the Divided Kingdom of Israel and Judah.

When God’s prophets tried to catch the attention of God’s people with graphic and pithy words, the people ignored them. They could not—or chose not to—listen and heed. When God’s spokesmen unfurled the banners of truth, the people of Israel and Judah used them to shine their idols and polish their accumulated gold. It turned out to be the way of death.

Capsules and Captions

Perceptive teachers and writers have long recognized the great learning value of capsulized truths—short, memorable statements that summarize the bigger, deeper truths of the lesson. Indeed, lesson titles themselves serve much the same function (and probably deserve much more attention and notice than most adult teachers give to them). Having such statements on regular display in the classroom offers real reinforcement and review possibilities. Having learners compose “headlines” based on the lesson texts offers opportunities for genuine reflection and reasoning.

The Teacher as “Editor”

In the field of journalism, editors often have the task of determining titles or section headings within a given piece of material. The Sunday school teacher of

adults can play the same role in the classroom, giving titles to the parts or to the whole of a particular lesson.

As an introductory exercise to a series of lessons focusing on the Divided Kingdom, a “front page” of the *Jerusalem Journal* or the *Samaria Sunset* could carry an item to represent each lesson in the series. Compare the following “headlines” with the lesson texts to be studied. Can you match each one with a text? Try your skill; then check your responses with the answers below.

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| • “King Opts for Youth Movement in His Council” | 1. 1 Kings 12:3-16 |
| • “Relocation Plans in Full Swing” | 2. 1 Kings 17:1-16 |
| • “Meteorological Madman Menaces Monarch” | 3. 1 Kings 18:20-39 |
| • “New Song Sweeps Charts” | 4. 1 Kings 22:15-28 |
| • “Mountaintop Experience Proves Fatal” | 5. Amos 1:1,2; 2:4-10 |
| • “Bad News—Good News; Which Do You Want?” | 6. Amos 4:2-5; 5:18-24 |
| • “Prophet Lies to Tell the Truth” | 7. Hosea 1:2–2:4 |
| • “Local Man Called to Be Prophet” | 8. Hosea 11:1-9 |
| • “Three or Four Is Enough” | 9. Micah 3:5-12; 6:3-8 |
| • “Redevelopment of Urban Areas Planned” | 10. Isaiah 6 |
| • “Lions and Bears and Serpents—Oh, My!” | 11. Isaiah 7 |
| • “Once Loved, Twice Rejected” | 12. Isaiah 5 |
| • “Holy Man Marries Unholy Woman” | 13. 2 Kings 17:6-18 |

Here is the suggested order of how the lessons are matched with the headlines: lessons 1, 13, 2, 12, 3, 11, 4, 10, 5, 9, 6, 8, 7. Did you decide differently on some? Good! From such differences of opinion and interpretation, a worthy discussion and explanation can often result. This is just the kind of careful thinking every teacher of adults wants to see in the class. (A teacher might want to display a large replica of a “front page” in the classroom and add relevant “headlines” week by week throughout the study.)

This same kind of headline display can be used with an individual lesson: create and display a headline for each verse, but do not identify the verse it represents. Then have the learners match each headline with the appropriate verse. Consider this example for Hosea 1:2–2:4: 1:2, “Finding a Wife In Israel”; 1:3, “Prophet Weds Suddenly”; 1:4, “Jezreel to Be Reeled In”; 1:5, “When the

Bow Breaks”; 1:6, “Daughter Given Merciless Name”; 1:7, “Army Not Good Enough to Defend Judah”; 1:8, “Third Child Not a Charm”; 1:9, “Contract to Be Broken”; 1:10, “Population Projected to Reach Uncountable Numbers”; 1:11, “Two Nations to Be Reunited Under One King”; 2:1, “Stop Thinking in Negatives”; 2:2, “Leader Calls for New Morality”; 2:3, “Naked Ambition; Unquenchable Thirst”; 2:4, “Children Suffer From Parents’ Mistakes

Displaying or simply reading such headlines in random order and asking the class to match each to a relevant verse can encourage close examination of the text. Again, occasional disagreement can be used to good learning advantage.

Another idea is to reveal or read all “headlines” in the same order as the verses, asking learners to explain how each headline capsulizes (or fails to capsulize) the main idea of a specific verse. Class members may well be able to “edit” certain headlines to represent better the truth stated in each. For example, suggesting that the word *Adulterous* be inserted before *Parents’* in the entry for Hosea 2:4 may be an improvement.

A third way the teacher can serve as “editor” is to give the class several “headlines” for a lesson (or a lesson segment or verse) and ask the group to decide which is the best one to represent the truth presented. Consider these three headline choices for 1 Kings 17: “Where’s Elijah? Witnesses See Him One Place, Then Another”; “Prophet Curses King, Comforts Pagan Woman”; “From A (Ahab) to Z (Zarephath), Elijah Goes.” Ask learners to choose which headline best summarizes the lesson truth and to be prepared to “defend” their choices

The Learner as “Reporter”

Although a teacher can encourage thinking through capsulized truths that he has written, even more thinking takes place when the learners must create the words. Before a teacher asks the learners to do some “headline writing,” he will probably have to demonstrate the activity with one of the ideas suggested above. But once he does, some learners will find themselves doing the activity mentally as they look at different texts and lessons.

One simple way to get started is to work collectively, either as a class or in small groups. Asking for a list of “key words” is a good place to begin. For a lesson from 1 Kings 12, the list would probably include such words as *Rehoboam*, *yoke*, *lighter*, *advice*, *old*, *young*, *scorpions*, and others. Once the group has a list, call for someone to incorporate as many as possible in a summary statement. For the words suggested above, one might propose, “Rehoboam Rejects the Old, Takes Advice of the Young.” Someone with a bit more imagination might suggest, “King Readies a Yoke of Scorpions: Watch

Out!” One of the learners might develop the list of key words and ideas with the entire group and then ask smaller groups to pen the “headlines.” These headlines can be shared with everyone after some deliberation

A second way to have learners devise the “headline” statements would be to give each learner a verse from the lesson text and to ask each to compose a headline for the verse’s main idea. Several words in the verse should be highlighted, particularly verbs and other key words. Ask the learners to use one or more of the highlighted words or related words in each headline. One could highlight 2 Kings 17:6 for such an activity as follows: “In the ninth year of Hoshea, the *king* of Assyria *captured* Samaria and *deported* the Israelites to Assyria. He *settled* them in Halah, in Gozan on the Habor River and in the *towns* of the Medes.” Verse 7 could be marked as, “All this took place because the Israelites had *sinned* against the Lord their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They *worshipped* other *gods*.” Imaginative class members will create headlines such as “Israel Removed by Ruler’s Relocation Plan” (v. 6) and “Faithless Israelites Forget; Fear False Gods” (v. 7). Having each adult read the headline that he or she prepared and calling for others to identify the relevant verse will facilitate a careful look at the text and what it says.

Of course, if the class is in the habit of participating in a variety of writing activities, all the teacher will need to do is ask members to create “headlines” for units, lessons, or verses. And they can be encouraged by being reminded that there are no right and wrong answers. Headlines can be matter-of-fact, declarative statements, enigmatic phrases, or alliterative axioms. Though brief, they can plant the seed of a “germ idea” that will often result in a full-grown, fruitful plant. That’s what every teacher of adults wants and that’s what the Lord’s kingdom must produce: mature, reproducing disciples.

The church needs a few more headlines touting the good news of good deeds done. The church needs a few more headliners, willing to step forward so that Jesus Christ can be lifted up before others who need to see the gospel in action. Making both the church and Christ more attractive to the world—that’s exactly what Bible study is designed to accomplish. That’s exactly what the teacher of adults wants to happen.