

Thursday Nights Going Deeper: “Finding Life in the Scriptures”

Week 2 – How to Make Sense of the Bible



Opening discussion: Each week we will break into different small groups to engage in relational, easy-going conversation to discover how each of us process the topics at hand, consider what challenges we may be experiencing with this topic, and “crowd-source” solutions and ideas to take our engagement with God’s Word to the next level.

As we begin today, move rather quickly...spend just a minute or two with each person in your small group and discuss: *Where do you struggle to understand the Bible? Where do you feel the most confused? Where do you feel the most uneducated? What troubles you about the Bible? What do you wish you knew or understood better?* **PRAY for one another** for God to reveal Himself in this session!

Steps to Comprehending the Scriptures:

STEP ONE: Understand the narrative

- Look for where you **fit** within it—both in terms of direct theology, and also in common **experience**.

STEP TWO: Slow down...this is not reading the newspaper or a novel

- Soak, contemplate, meditate; allow **Holy Spirit** to guide.

“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

John 14:25-26

- Your goal is to **equip** yourself for using scripture in multiple ways:
 - **Memorization:** *Equipped to pull scripture into your circumstances*
 - **Reference:** *Use tools to look up what you need beyond what you have memorized*
 - **Narrative example:** *Finding yourself in the example of others*
 - **Devotional:** *God speaking to you “all-time / our-time” principles and application*
 - **Prayer / Spiritual battle:** *Using the scriptures to guide prayer and spiritual battle*

STEP THREE: Understand the structure of scripture

- It is not organized in a *novel-like* event-by-event narrative.
- It is organized more as an *anthology* of interrelated components of history, revelation, wisdom, and prophecy.
 - There are **66 books, written by 40 authors, over a period of 2,500 years.**
 - There are two primary periods in which it was written:
 - Old Testament = **2,500 to 400 B.C.**
 - New Testament = **30 to 95 A.D.**

Overview of the Old Testament:

- The Old Testament is a history of *Israel* (God’s people).
 - There are four primary types of books:
 - **Historical**
 - 1st period--Foundation
 - 2nd period--Conquest
 - 3rd period—Kingdom
 - **Prophetic**
 - **Wisdom & Worship**
 - **Experiential**

Period:	Historical	Prophetic	Wisdom	Experiential
Foundations	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy			Job
Conquest	Joshua Judges			Ruth
Kingdom	1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon	Esther

Overview of the New Testament:

- After the last book of the Old Testament, there were **400** years of silence.
- Jesus came at the **fullness** of time.

“So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”

Galatians 4:3-5

Three Primary Types of New Testament Books:

- **History/Biography**
 - Matthew, Mark, Luke, John = Life of Jesus.
 - Acts = History of the early church.
- **Letters of Paul**
 - Romans through Hebrews*

(Note: The authorship of Hebrews is the only New Testament book to be unknown. Some scholars say that the Apostle Paul wrote Hebrews; others contend he did not. While there are many similar stylistic traits between Hebrews and the other letters Paul wrote, there are also some glaring differences. It will remain a mystery who wrote the book, its authorship lost to history.)*

- **Letters of others**
 - James – Brother of Jesus
 - 1 & 2 Peter – Disciple of Jesus
 - 1, 2 & 3 John – Disciple of Jesus
 - Jude – Brother of Jesus
- **Revelation** is considered by some to be the completion of God’s revelation to man.*

“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”

Revelation 22:18-19

*(*Note: Through the years, this verse has been applied by many to mean “adding to” the whole of the Bible. However, most scholars would agree that this passage in Revelation speaks only of adding to the book of Revelation. What is clear, though, is that the early church agreed on closing the canon to include only the 27 books of the New Testament, and that no further doctrinally authoritative books would be written. With the closing of the canon—which occurred as early as 160AD—it is understood that God’s authoritative revelation was complete. In a later session, we will discuss the details of how the canon came to be, and how we can trust that it has been properly closed.)*

STEP FOUR: Understand the difference between various types of books and the different interpretation techniques within each type of book.

To properly ascertain the meaning of any passage of scripture, the context in which it was written is most important. Grasping the context includes looking at the surrounding passages, but it also goes much deeper. Let's examine some rules that will help us build a better contextual understanding:

- **Know the *type* of book you are studying and its bearing on context.**
 - **History** – *provides chronological statements of fact based on the progression of events. History does not necessarily provide insight into God's will in a matter. It simply states fact. For example, the story of David committing adultery (see 2 Samuel 11) being in the Bible does not mean that God approved of his actions. Good biblical interpretation of historical literature will look for how God reacted to an event.*
 - **Law** – *gives precept-by-precept imperatives on things God is expecting. It is vital, however, to understand the larger context of the law in relation to the New Covenant to understand its meaning to us, and its meaning in the over-arching history of God's work with man. See Galatians 3:19-25 for an important discussion on the purpose of the law.*
 - **Epistle** – *letters written in the New Testament to local churches. These letters are specific and unique to the recipients, but also carry with them timeless teachings and modeling of the biblical practices of Christ-followers. They should be interpreted in the context of the particular church being addressed and its history. But we should also consider that whatever instructions were given, when understood for the transferable principle, applies to us today as well.*
 - **Wisdom** – *spells out particular thought-by-thought advice based on the life experiences of the author, the wisdom given him, and the larger truth of wisdom from God. Understanding must be gleaned from the context of the author's own life to the advice being given. From the basis of their own life, the author may or may not be representing the exact, holy opinion of God. What must be understood is the author's journey, and therefore, why he would write these words.*
 - **Prophetic** – *speaks on behalf of God with a bold and strong message. Prophecy is not only predictive of coming events, but also speaks the whole heart of God on a matter. It should be understood in the context of what is being warned or addressed, and in the historical situation being addressed. Perhaps the greatest mistake New Testament believers make in reading the Old Testament prophets is to "over-apply" the stern words to themselves, taking upon themselves a level of judgment and condemnation that is out of context. God's anger being spoken to the entire nation of Israel over a centuries-long sin issue should not necessarily be transferred to some immediate short-term situation in our own personal lives. At the same time, principles of how God feels about situations can—and should—be drawn from the prophets for our own life.*

- **Experiential** – tells a particular story of one individual or a small group of people and their dealings with God. Like historical books, experiential books do not necessarily show God’s will on a matter from their simple narrative. Meaning and interpretation has to include an investigation into God’s response, wisdom shared by the author, and how it relates with other passages of scripture.
- Understand the **phase** of God’s **progressive revelation** the writing is found within.



- Discover the **purpose** the book was written for.
 - Use a commentary or study Bible with good introduction notes.
 - Who was the book written to?
 - What physical, political, emotional or spiritual conditions were the recipients in?
 - Who wrote the book?
 - What was the immediate circumstance the author was writing for?
 - What impact would that immediate purpose have on interpreting the text at large?
 - Look for the author’s agenda in clues within the text itself:
 - Clear statements at the beginning or conclusions of books
 - Look for what the writer tends to emphasize and what that emphasis might demonstrate about the context he is addressing
 - Look for the direct exhortations given and what might be behind such imperatives

- Notice the type of **argument** being made and its connection to meaning.
 - **Historical** – moves chronologically through sequence of events; context is to be understood in relation to surrounding events.
 - **Doctrinal** – is making a clear point about a matter of belief; context is to be understood in the flow of point-by-point precepts building upon one another, and in context of the outcome of the doctrinal point being made.
 - **Logical** – the author is using reason as an argument to embrace the larger doctrinal truth being presented; context is to be understood in the outcome of the doctrinal point being made.
 - **Tangential** – the author is making a separate, perhaps parenthetical, point; context is to be gleaned from what might have led the writer to a tangent, but the point can stand on its own as an individual thought.

- Use a commentary or study Bible’s **outline** of the book to discern placement of the text within the larger **message** of the book.



Beware: Some contexts, when understood properly, will totally alter the meaning of a passage. Perhaps the best example can be found in the book Job. Most of the book is a conversation between Job and four of his friends as he sought to understand the pain and difficulty he was experiencing. If we were to take teaching from these conversations, we could end up building a theology that is inaccurate. What we find, when we read the whole book, is that God was angry with Job’s friends for giving them bad advice. But to pull a verse out of their advice might sound godly, unless we learned God’s real opinion on it by looking deeper into how He responded.

Group Exercise / Lab Experience:

Break back into your small groups for more in-depth discussion on tonight's topic. Pace yourselves and plan on 20 minutes for this discussion. Be sure to leave time for as many people to comment as would like on each other the core discussion points and be sure to leave time to pray for one another. Appoint someone to be timekeeper and help facilitate the discussion to keep us moving. Appoint someone else to take key notes of the most important concepts shared that can be quickly offered back to the large group at the end of our session tonight.

Discuss your experiences with different types of Biblical books:

- **Look back at the notes in this session** to run exercises on different examples. Consider these books:
 - Job
 - Psalms
 - Jeremiah
 - Gospels
 - Revelation
- **Crowd-source / group discuss the following** (***BUT...be very careful here...** encourage those who do not know as much about these books as you who know more... what tools do you use to gain the knowledge you have? How can you encourage others that they are on the right path?*):
 - What is the type of book? (I.e. history, law, epistle, prophetic, wisdom, etc.)
 - What phase of God's revelation and history does it fit within?
 - What kind of argument is being made?
 - What is the book's purpose?
- **How would you read these differently** based on your answers above? How should you approach interpreting them differently? Can you identify which literary style these are? How does that change your interpretation?
- **How do we integrate Old Testament and New Testament** books like these into one another?