

her•me•neu•tics

HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

— an eight week course with pastor ben —

Lesson 2 – How to Study a Passage (Part 1)

In our last lesson we went over some foundational principles for hermeneutics. We saw that hermeneutics is the study of bible interpretation, seeking to answer the question “How do I carefully and accurately understand and apply God’s Word?” We saw that the goal of hermeneutics was “To learn what the original writer meant, to recognize the timeless truth in what he said, and then to apply that truth to our specific situation.” We concluded by talking about the necessary helps of the Holy Spirit, a good Bible teacher, and other resources.

Definitions

Genre – styles of literature

Genre simply means that there are different types of art, whether that be different movie genres (mystery, action, romance, comedy), different music genres (classical, rock, bluegrass, country), or literature genres (poetry, fiction, biography, essay). The Bible is a collection of many different books with many different genres.

General Hermeneutics – rules for studying any passage in the Bible

There are certain rules for studying the Bible that remain true whether you are talking about a poem or a narrative. Leviticus or Romans. These principles are called general hermeneutics, and we will cover many of these principles in this lesson and next lesson.

Special Hermeneutics – rules for studying passages in specific genres

These rules for Bible study that vary based on what genre you are reading. How you study, understand, and apply the law is different in many ways than how you study, understand, and

apply a parable. The last four lessons together will cover specific instructions and things to be on the lookout for in specific genres.

So let's get started with general hermeneutics. We will give a six-step guide to studying any passage, and in this lesson we will cover the first two. These six steps include:

1. Study the historical, cultural, and literary context
2. Observe the details
3. Outline the passage
4. Study key words
5. Study themes
6. Apply the truth personally

1. Study the Context

It's hard to overstate how important context is. A word, a phrase, or a sentence needs some kind of context to make sense. Everything we say has a context to it, we just normally take the context for granted. If I said "Trump and the democrats are at it again" you would know exactly what I was talking about. If someone 2,000 years from now read that sentence, living in the continent of Africa, they would be thoroughly confused. Who or what is a Trump? Who or what are the democrats? Again, how long have they been "at it"? Is this something that has gone on for years, decades, or centuries? These questions never occur to us because we already know the context.

As we study context, we will break it down into three general categories. The first is historical – think "Trump and the democrats." The second deals with cultural differences between the culture of the Bible and the culture we live in today. Often the historical and the cultural will blend into one another and at times may be hard to distinguish. Finally, we will examine what we are calling the literary context – the words before and after that help clarify the meaning.

Historical Context

Historical context refers to what was happening at the time the book was written. This context can be further broken down into the **general historical context** "What was going on in that year or decade?" And the **specific historical context** "What events led to the writing of this particular book?"

- **General Background Information**

Having a general understanding of what is going on in the Old Testament and the New Testament can help us better understand what each book is saying. Could you write out on a page or two the basic plotline of what happens in the Old Testament? Who are the major

nations that Israel must deal with? Where are they located? Could you give a brief description of what happens in the major time periods of the Old Testament? What about the New Testament, how well do you know the general plot? How did Christianity spread from Jerusalem? What were the three missionary journeys of Paul? What cities did he visit on those journeys, and in what order?

To better be able to answer these questions, spend time studying the historical books (Judges through Esther) and the book of Acts. These foundational books help give context to much of what we read elsewhere in our Bibles and can do a lot to increase our understanding. Knowing the general background is especially important for the prophetic books and the New Testament letters as these books tend to assume a general knowledge of what is happening at the time they are written.

- **Specific Background Information**

But beyond knowing generally what is going on in the time period, we will often want to get more specific and know what specific situation led to a specific book being written? Why did Paul write to Philippi? Or Corinth? Why did Haggai write his book? Or Isaiah? We will talk about this more under the next section of observation when we discuss something called mirror reading, but at this point understand that knowing what led to a certain book being written can help unlock the meaning of that book.

Cultural Context

Different cultures look at the world in slightly different ways. In American cultures, leaving food on your plate is rude and is essentially saying, “This didn’t taste good and I don’t want to eat it.” In Asian cultures, eating everything on your plate is rude and is essentially saying, “You didn’t provide enough food for me and I’m still hungry.” Who is right? Well, neither one is right or wrong. It’s simply a different way of looking at the world.

When we study our Bible, we are studying a book written to a different culture. Studying the cultural background can be difficult, because you don’t always know when there is a cultural difference. We tend to see the world through the lens of our own culture, and so it’s hard to know when what we’re seeing is our own lens and when it is the actually what Scriptures say. This shouldn’t lead to despair, as if we can never understand the Bible because we are from a different culture. The human condition remains constant from culture to culture, and God’s Word speaks to every culture. But it should at least create the awareness that we have to consider the fact that there might be some cultural differences, and be open to someone clarifying our understanding of a passage. Checking out good resources will help point out these types of differences, and the more you study God’s Word and get to know the culture of the

ancient people to whom God's Word was originally written, the better you will become at recognizing where these types of differences are likely to show up.

Example: Is it wrong to allow a Jehovah's Witnesses in your house for a half hour discussion if you intend to share the gospel with them? Doesn't 2 John 10-11 states "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds." Isn't John saying that we are never allowed to let a false teacher into our home ever under any circumstances? What if we have a family member that has converted and is on a 2 year preaching tour, can they come over for Thanksgiving dinner? Here understanding the cultural context can be a real help.

During the time John wrote, it was common for teachers of Christianity to travel from city to city, instructing people about the doctrines of their faith. When these teachers showed up in a town, it was expected that as an act of hospitality the Christians there would lodge these speakers and provide for their needs. So what do you do when someone enters your town claiming to be a teacher, but his teaching sounds very different from what the apostle John told you when he disciplined you? This teacher is probably wrong, but he's still a brother, right? Christians are ostracized enough in society, do we need to start excluding people because they have a different take on the message of Jesus? John was quick to write and give the definitive answer: Yes! We do exclude people who bring false doctrine even if they claim to be a follower of Jesus just like you. You do not put them up and you don't even greet them warmly.

Christians may differ on how to apply this verse to today's situation. Some may still feel that inviting a Jehovah's Witness inside is a help to them and would violate the spirit of what John is saying here, especially his statement about not even giving them a warm greeting. Others might disagree and allow someone in their home for the purpose of sharing the true gospel with them, refusing to in any way support their mission and making their disapproval politely but clearly known. This begins to get into the area of application, which we will look at later. But however you end up applying this passage, having a clear understanding of the cultural situation and the difference between the culture of the time and American culture today helps us understand the passage better.

Do I need to know the historical and cultural background?

Pointing out the help that background information can play might leave a believer discouraged, wondering if they can know God's Word on their own. Personal Bible study is impossible without needing to take college level courses in the Ancient Near East or first century Rome. This is true for two reasons. **First, the most important background information is the information available to you in your Bible.** Knowing the history of Israel and understanding Acts will be the biggest help in studying your Bible. **Secondly, the historical and cultural information normally clarifies or illuminates a generally correct understanding of a passage.** The point of 2 John 10-11 is clear, even if you don't understand the ancient practice of

hospitality. The strong call for repudiation of false teachers can be understood by simply reading the passage, but a clearer understanding emerges when we look at the historical and cultural background.

Is a historical or cultural background ever *necessary* to understand a passage correctly? I would hesitatingly answer yes, but I would be quick to add that 1) this is rare and 2) this is normally the case in passages that are confusing to begin with. For example, the Old Testament law forbid boiling a baby goat in its mother's milk. For a long time, this puzzled Bible students and the best explanation was that there was just something unusually cruel about killing a baby and then cooking it in the milk designed for it to drink. However, recent archaeological discoveries from the surrounding nations of Israel have uncovered that this was a ritual that used in the worship of pagan gods. These kinds of specific, detailed questions can often be illuminated by historical and cultural insights, but the message of Romans that justification is by faith and not works of the law will not be overturned by historical and cultural considerations.

Where can I find this information?

I've mentioned several times that finding good sources of information is important. As we were reminded in our previous section, you can't believe everything you read online. Included at the end of this lesson is a bibliography that can be a help in finding resources to help walk you through the available resources.

Literary Context

For our purposes, I'm going to break down our study of the literary context into the immediate context, the book context, and the Bible context.

- **Immediate Context**

This is one of the simplest yet most important principles we will cover in this class. The sentences before and after a word, phrase, or sentence give it its meaning, because **what a phrase means is determined by what is said around it**. This simple principle is routinely violated by many well intentioned believers who are rightly convinced that every word of God matters, but fail to recognize that every word of God is given in a context. For example, did you know that the Bible says "There is no God?" in Psalm 14:1. The whole verse, of course, goes on to say "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God." Context matters.

Example: Gideon and his fleece. Many believers have thought that Gideon here is using the fleece to try and decide what God's will for him was, so that when they have to make a decision and they are not sure what to do, they "put out a fleece." The problem? If we read the story of Gideon carefully, we come to realize that God had already told Gideon what to

do! The fleece was not about discerning God's will, the fleece was about deciding whether or not Gideon was going to do what he already knew God wanted! Gideon did not put the fleece out because of his faith, but because of his doubt. Don't be like Gideon! When God tells you to do something, just do it.

Example: In 1 Corinthians 9:22 Paul says that he is "made all things to all *men*." This is often used as an excuse to participate in questionable activities because we need to be culturally relevant. Is that what Paul is talking about here? Is Paul seeking to be culturally relevant to the Corinthians? Let's read the verse in context.

19 For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. 20 And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; 21 To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. 22 To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

Paul isn't talking about cultural relevance at all. He means by this that he limits his own freedoms so that he can share the gospel with the most amount of people. He's talking about removing things that would make it harder for him to evangelize. When he's with Jews, he keeps the Kosher laws and observes Sabbath, because for a Jew to explain how the Jewish Messiah had come while crunching on some bacon would not have gone over very well. But he realizes that those laws aren't necessary for salvation, and so when he's dining with a Gentile and they offer him a honeyed ham, he eats it. Far from being a call to participate in worldly activities so we have something to talk about with unbelievers, this verse is actually a call to sacrifice things we want so that nothing gets in the way of our gospel witness.

- **Book Context**

We can broaden this principle out, however, to include the message of an entire book. Specific statements within the book that might puzzle us are often part of a larger whole that is making a point.

Example: Many people have been disturbed by their reading of Judges 17-21. These four nauseating chapters tell of idolatry, religious profiteering, theft, rape, near genocide, and kidnapping wives. What in the world are these chapters doing in our Bible? Two verses at the beginning and end of this section help us understand this section. We read at the start and conclusion of these sordid stories "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." In other words, the revulsion we feel when we

read these stories are exactly the point. These stories are a case study in what happens when there is no authority to point us back God.

- **Biblical Context**

Finally, we want to ask how what this author is saying fits into the larger story of the Bible. If what we think one specific author is saying in one specific passage disagrees with the rest of the clear teaching of Scripture, we have probably misunderstood something. Asking how a certain passage contributes to the overall message of Scripture can be a helpful guardrail to keep us from going off of the edge, but it can also help us understand the message of a given passage.

Example: Going back to our previous example, the author of judges is pointing out that we need a king. Israel needed leadership, because without a king they were a disaster. But the following books will show us that just having a king isn't enough, of course. We need a king who is godly and points us to the Lord. Ultimately, we will realize that no merely human king will do. Ultimately, we need king Jesus.

Context matters. The historical context, the cultural context, and the literary context. Most mistakes in Bible interpretation would be avoided if people would pay more careful attention to the context of what they are reading.

2. Observe the details

When it comes to studying your Bible, think of yourself as a detective. We enjoy a good detective story because detectives have the ability to notice details we completely overlook, and yet once they point them out, we wonder how we could have missed them. A good Bible teacher will do the same. You should not walk away from a sermon thinking to yourself, "Wow, I never would have known that unless the preacher told me so," but rather "Wow, how could I not have seen that before? It's so obvious!" Your own Bible study should be similar. Your goal is to read carefully, studying the details over and over, asking why this sentence, why this word, why here, why now.

One that I have found to be very helpful in my own personal study is to get a journaling Bible or to print off a copy of a passage or a book for the purpose marking it up. If you print your own, consider taking out verse numbers and even paragraph breaks. Double or triple space the lines so that you have room to write and make notes. And then make it your goal to fill the paper with as many observations as possible. What kinds of things should you be on the look out for? Well...

- **Look for background information**

We seek to set up the specific background of a book by carefully reading its contents to try and figure out what situation they were addressing. We call this "mirror reading." It's like

listening to half a phone conversation and trying to figure out what the other person is saying and what the conversation is about. When it comes to Scripture, we listen closely to what a book of the Bible says, and then try to reconstruct what led to the book being written.

Example: The background of 1 Corinthians. In Acts 18 we read the account of Paul's founding of the church at Corinth. He spent a year and a half in the Greek city of Corinth before returning to Antioch and then heading to Ephesus. While at Ephesus he wrote the letters of 1 and 2 Corinthians. When we read 1 Corinthians carefully, we notice a couple of important details. Paul says in 5:9-11, "I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: 10 Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. 11 But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat."

Apparently, at some point Paul had already written to Corinth and told them not to hang out with people who were living in immorality. Unfortunately, the Corinthians had misunderstood him and had avoided immoral people of the world while continuing to befriend Christians living in immorality. Paul tells them they have it backwards. Christians should separate from Christians who are living sinful lives, not from unsaved people living sinful lives. In chapter 7:1 Paul states "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me." Apparently, the Corinthians had written back with some questions. In 1:11 and in 11:18 Paul mentions that he had received some oral reports about the church.

The background for 1 Corinthians would then go something like this. Paul was in Ephesus ministering and somehow found out that there were problems in Corinth. He wrote a letter addressing the problems, which was at least partly misunderstood by the Corinthians. They sent him a letter back asking about a number of issues, and along with this letter Paul received oral reports about other problems in Corinth that the church didn't want to bring up, including their division over their favorite teachers (1), their abuses of the Lord's supper (11), and probably heretical teaching about the resurrection (15). Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to respond to these issues.

- **Look for words that connect ideas**

This will help greatly when we get to step 3 next week – outlining. I know English is the favorite class of only a strange, eclectic bunch, but look for conjunctions and connector words. It might be well-used but I don't think it's over used to say, "Every time you find a therefore in the Bible ask what it's there for." But don't stop there. Pay attention to the word "for" which often means "because." Look for words like since, although, and, even if,

so that, in order that, that, and other words that help us see how these ideas relate to one another.

- **Look for repeated words and themes**

Take your printed copy of God's Word and go through with a pen or pencil and underline words that you see showing up multiple times. Read through a whole book several times in one sitting. Look for specific words or general ideas (sin, iniquity, rebellion; or world, Gentiles, those whose understanding is darkened). Underline with different colors, or make different marks for different ideas that show up often.

- **Look for things that don't make sense**

While you're studying, mark questions that you have. Make a note when something is confusing and come back to it later. Try and come up with an answer on your own, then check a resource later if you're still stuck to see how a commentator addresses your question. Keep digging and don't quit because something is initially confusing or hard to understand. If you find a phrase or a verse or a paragraph that confuses you, study it out. Figure out what you're missing. If you disagree with something you read, either you are misunderstanding what you are reading, or you are wrong. Allow God's Word to change you, rather than selecting only the parts of the Bible that fit into the box you give it.

Two helpful questions:

It can be helpful to make sure the parts are related to the whole, however. Or to put it another way, we don't want to miss the forest for the trees. So let me give you two overarching questions that can help you as you seek to observe the details of a particular book or passage.

- **"What is this author talking about?" – Subject**

As you understand the background, look for repeated words or themes, and seek to get a general idea of the flow of a passage by looking at connecting words, try to sum up in one word what the author is talking about. For example, if we were to do this for the book of Philemon, the subject would be *forgiveness* or *reconciliation*.

- **"What is he saying about what he is talking about?" – Theme**

Once you've determined the subject, ask yourself what specific point the author is trying to make about the subject. For example, in Philemon Paul's point about forgiveness is that our new position in Christ radically changes how we relate to other believers. Now, as we work through the nitty gritty details of the book we can relate them back to the main idea, like tributaries leading into a larger river, which ultimately leads into the ocean of God's truth.

Bibliography

A wealth of resources is available to the modern student of God's Word. However, using the best and most helpful resources can be a big help in understanding and rightly applying God's Word. The resources below represent the work of careful students of God's Word. They vary from being very basic to being for the advanced lay student of God's Word.

Note: As always, use discernment with any resource. Inclusion of a resource in this list does not imply agreement with everything that the author says, but rather a recognition that much of what is said is helpful. I have not read through every resource completely! However, my interaction with the resources and authors below have impressed me enough that I have included them in this list.

Computer Resources

- Preceptaustin.org – a free website that pulls together resources for books of the Bible and various topics/themes. Worth browsing especially if you do not have other resources available.
- **Logos** – a powerful computer program that allows the user to purchase books, take notes, study the Greek and Hebrew originals, and much more. This is a resource I use every day.
 - Basic – Free introductory program. Includes many free resources and the ability to study Greek and Hebrew words without knowing the language.
 - Fundamentals \$49.99 (Currently) – Contains many helpful resources listed below, including Wiersbe's commentaries on the New Testament, Zuck's book on hermeneutics, Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, the Bible Knowledge commentary, and much more.

Study Bibles – include introductory material on books of the Bible, helpful articles, and brief comments on every book of the Bible.

- Ryrie Study Bible (\$35)
- MacArthur Study Bible (\$15 digital; \$30 hardback)

Concordance – lists out all the places a certain Greek or Hebrew word is used and can often be used by those who don't know Greek or Hebrew. While originally these were printed resources, the ability to search on computer has made print copies obsolete.

- Biblewebapp.com
- Strong's Concordance – the gold standard for concordances, now available online: (<https://www.biblestudytools.com/concordances/strongs-exhaustive-concordance/>)
- Logos – see above

Bible Dictionary – Give articles on specific issues such as locations, customs, and other resources

- New Bible Dictionary (\$20) – basic, inexpensive dictionary.
- Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (\$35 kindle; \$50 hardback)
- Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (2 vols.) (\$75) – more detailed but also pricier. A good work that I refer to often.
- International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (<https://www.studylight.org/encyclopedias/isb.html>) – This is a free resource, but it is over 100 years old and so there is much new information that it lacks. However, for those with no Bible dictionary it still contains much that is helpful.

Commentaries

- **Bible Knowledge Commentary (\$70)** – A good way to get a little something on every book of the Bible that is deeper than a study Bible.
- **Wiersbe (“Be Series” or “Expository Outlines”)** – Solid biblical teaching that manages to be both profound yet simple and applicable. Reasonably priced and available on every book of the Bible.
- **MacArthur (NT)** – solid, detailed commentaries available on every book of the NT.
- **Spurgeon’s Treasury of David** – a three volume commentary on the Psalms (<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/treasury-of-david/>)
- **Bible Background Commentary (OT and NT)** – a 2 volume set that includes helpful information for the historical and cultural background for different passages.
- **Tyndale New/Old Testament Commentary Series** – brief yet thorough commentaries on every book of the Bible. Some authors are more solid than others.

Books on Hermeneutics

- **Basic Bible Interpretation** (Roy Zuck)
- **How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth; How to Read the bible Book by Book** (Gordon and Fee) – These books, especially the first, have become the gold standard for hermeneutics aimed at a lay audience. They are tremendously helpful, but readers may not agree with everything the authors state, especially in chapter 2 on choosing a good Bible translation and the final chapter on Revelation.
- **Grasping God’s Word** (Duvall and Hays)
- **How to Read Series** (Tremper Longman III) – overall a helpful series giving practical aid on reading 5 challenging books of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Job, Psalms, Proverbs. The books on Genesis, Exodus, and Job contain some views on the Old Testament and history that I don’t agree with, and so I would recommend Psalms and Proverbs most heartily, with a reserved recommendation of Exodus and Genesis.