

her•me•neu•tics

HOW TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE

— an eight week course with pastor ben —

Lesson 6 Studying Stories

Stories grab our attention like few other things can. There's a reason we often start our children off with the stories of the Bible, because basically everyone loves a good story. Some may not like poetry. Others may not find essays or newspaper articles compelling. But good luck finding somebody who doesn't enjoy a good story. God knew this, that's why when He gave us His Word, He gave us a story. Every poem, law, epistle, and narrative we find contributes to the overall story of God through the work of Jesus seeking to restore a creation marred by sin. But not only is the whole Bible set up as a story, within the Bible itself the genre of narrative, or story, takes up a much of our Bibles. God knew that one of the most effective ways for Him to communicate His truth is to tell stories, and so He told lots of them!

Studying stories is a little odd. On one hand, we all get a story. But on the other hand, people make their living studying stories carefully, picking up on details and themes that the casual reader will miss. And some ways of thinking about stories are different in modern America than in Hebrew or Greece and Rome. Now at first studying a story in the way we will describe may seem tedious. You'll have a lot to think about when we read stories! Shouldn't a story just be read for the enjoyment of a story? Yes, reading stories should be enjoyable, but as you work to improve your skills in studying stories, eventually these steps will come more easily. After some practice, you will find yourself able to pick up on more details, to see how themes contribute to one another, and to recognize the purpose and the message of the stories you are reading.

History and Theology

One thing that might raise an eyebrow as we begin this lesson is treating the stories of the Bible as just that, as stories. Why would we study characters and plot and setting if the Bible records history? We wouldn't do that in a biography of George Washington, would we? The reason we study Scripture this way is because we recognize that the human author as well as the Holy Spirit

carefully crafted the accounts they gave us to teach important truths. The Bible is written as a work of literature, and the tools of studying literature help us understand the Bible better.

As we study the stories of the Old Testament, the Gospels, and Acts, we must realize that we are reading a theological history. When someone picks up a history book today, they are expecting to read a neutral, unbiased account of what happened, because we think that is what makes good history. A historian is not arguing for something, other than “This is what happened.” But this modern understanding of history, whether right or wrong, is not the view of history held by the writers of Scripture. The biblical authors did not set out to neutrally relay facts; they wrote to persuade.

The biblical writers are selective as to what they include and what they leave out. This couldn't be clearer than near the end of John's gospel where he states “And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: 31 But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.” John 20:30-31 He goes on to write at the end of his book: “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.” (John 21:25). John is telling you that he is choosing stories, and even choosing details within those stories, to make a definite point. This principle holds true for all the history of the Bible. Kings and Chronicles give the life of the same king and leave out or add details as those stories fit within the overall message each book is trying to communicate. Matthew will include a story that Mark left out, John will go on to sound very differently from Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These authors see in history important lessons, and so they include the details that help them make their point, and they leave out extra details that fail to contribute directly to their theme.

This does not mean that what they wrote is false or any less credible. Actually, - in order for their theology to be right, they need to get history right. But I say this to make the point that when we study the history of the Bible, while we shouldn't doubt that it is accurate history, we need to realize that the authors believed history is meant to teach us. They are intending to communicate important truths about God's work of redemption with humanity, because they believe that God's providence in history reveals those truths. And so we will study the Bible as literature, focusing on setting, plot, and character, realizing that writers of Scripture carefully shaped these stories as stories, and so we are right to study them as stories.

The stories of the Bible can be found in the Old Testament in the Pentateuch, the historical books, in portions of Job, and at points in the prophets. In the New Testament we find narratives in the gospels and Acts. In many ways the way to study the stories in one section will look very similar to the way we study them in another section, but there will be differences. We have already made a distinction between general hermeneutics and special hermeneutics – general hermeneutics are principles that apply to any genre, special hermeneutics apply to one specific

genre (in this case, stories). However, within the genre of stories it's almost helpful to have that same breakdown, and so we will begin by talking about general principles for studying a story and then individually address the stories in the Old Testament, the gospels, and Acts.

General Principles for Studying Stories

As we look at the study of stories, we will cover three basic components: setting, plot, and characters. We will work through each of these individually and see how they work together to form a compelling story.

Setting

The setting is where and when the story takes place. The setting gives the necessary background and can help set the mood. Having a clear idea of where a story is taking place and what is going on at the time is often important to understand what the story is really about.

Plot

Plot is the series of events that make up the story. We will look at two key ingredients in any good plot and also see how the Bible often layers plots.

- **Components of a plot**

There are many different plots and many different types of plots. However, plots must have at least two key ingredients in them: conflict and resolution.

- **Conflict**

A plot normally follows a problem-solution pattern. This problem-solution pattern can involve all kinds of situations. A nation shows up on Israel's doorstep with a large army demanding money. The Pharisees and scribes challenge Jesus' teaching and authority. Paul is resisted by the religious elite in Jerusalem and must try to navigate a fair trial without paying an exorbitant bribe. Most stories begin by giving us the setting, and then at a certain point there is what we call the inciting moment, and we have a problem on our hands. The rest of the story will be about how the main character (the protagonist) handles the conflict.

When studying stories, simply stepping back and asking, "What is the main conflict going on?" can be a helpful way to study God's Word. Sometimes, the main conflict isn't what it appears on the surface. Often the conflict is, "Will man trust God and do things His way, or will he trust in his own wisdom and disobey God." When a king in Israel or Judah finds out there is an army waiting for them, the conflict on one level is, "What will happen to Israel?" But after you read these stories long enough you begin to realize that the real conflict under the surface is, "Will this king trust God's Word, repenting of

any national sin and willing to depend on God alone for victory? Or will he trust in his own military might, foreign alliances, or even pagan gods for his victory?"

- **Resolution**

A good story ends by showing how the problem is solved and resolving the tension. Now obviously, not every story has a happy ending. The resolution may be "Jephthah sacrificed his daughter." That's a very unsatisfying and unsettling conclusion, but that's the effect the author is trying to make. His point is that Israel without a godly king was a mess, because everyone did that which was right in their own eyes. Stories don't always resolve the way we want them to, but there normally is some type of resolution to the conflict.

Recognizing the basic pattern of a plot can help us evaluate stories carefully. Asking what the setting is, what the inciting action is, what the real conflict is, and how the author resolves the tension will help us understand better what the point of the story is.

- **Levels of plot**

Stories often overlap in the Bible, much like a book or TV series. For example, in the Chronicles of Narnia there are seven books that tell seven different stories. But when put together, they make up a larger story with characters, plots, and settings that span all seven books. Many TV series do this as well. You can watch this week's episode and for the most part it makes sense on its own. But often there is a bigger plot that covers the entire season or even the entire series, and that plot is moved forward one little story at a time. The Bible also works this way, where individual stories make their own point but at the same time they play into larger stories and ultimately into the whole story of the Bible. Let's look at a few examples of this phenomenon.

Example: In Genesis 22, God calls upon Abraham to give up Isaac as an offering on a mountain. Abraham immediately obeys and takes Isaac to the mountain God shows him, ready to offer him as a sacrifice when an angel tells him to stop. God now knows that Abraham is willing to offer anything God would ask, and so God renews His promises to Abraham and provides another sacrifice.

This story functions on several levels. First, there is the individual story of Abraham and his son. This story stands alone as a self-contained story. But this story plays into the greater story of Abraham's life. Abraham was called by God to go into a land that God would show him, leaving behind his family. But Abraham struggled to stay in the land where he was supposed to be, instead going down to Egypt because of a famine. We see him lie, act cowardly, and listen to his wife's terrible advice and then allow her to abuse her slave after her plan goes awry. But we also see him leave his homeland, trust God to fulfill His promises, and even fight an entire army to rescue his nephew. In this mixture of faith and failure, the

story of Isaac serves as the final word in Abraham's life. It is the climax of his whole life, the moment where he goes down in history as a man of faith. Abraham's life, in turn, is a one of a series of stories of the patriarchs. These stories often show how God is working in their lives to bring about godly character and working through their to bring about His plan of redemption for the world. And the story of the patriarchs is just one chapter of many in which God enacts His plan of redemption.

Example: Similarly, many stories in the gospels deal with the life of Jesus on an individual level with specific lessons about who Jesus is, but they are also being woven together to teach us certain big truths about who Jesus is and what he does. When reading the gospels, always ask, "Why this story here and now?" and you'll find that often it is playing into the larger structure the author has in mind. In Mark 8, we find the feeding of the four thousand, the Pharisees demand a sign, and Christ warn the disciples about the leaven of the Pharisees. The last story of these three weaves together the other two. The disciples should have learned from the feeding of the four thousand (and the feeding of the five thousand) that Jesus could meet any temporal need, and should have been more concerned with the unbelief on display from the Pharisees than whether or not they had bread.

Characters

Biblical authors rarely tell you why a character did a certain thing, or what they were thinking, or even if they are a good guy or a bad guy. They leave it up to the reader to evaluate the characters and decide whether the character is good, bad, or somewhere in between. There are several ways the writers of the biblical stories can develop characters.

- **Descriptions**

Descriptive details tend to be pretty sparse in the stories of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. In modern America, we like our stories to be loaded with up random, pointless details to give us a clear mental picture of what is going on in the story. We want the shrubbery described, we want to have an idea of the main character's height, weight, skin color, hair color, and eye color so that we can know what they look like. We don't get that level of detail when we get to the stories of the Bible.

This means that when a detail of a character is described that description matters. When Ehud is described as left-handed, we should expect that to play into the story. The fact that Absalom's hair is described, even giving the weight of it when cut, is a random detail that should clue us in that his hair will be important. When we read that at his birth Esau is hairy, we expect his hair to be important later for the story.

- **Actions**

Often in biblical narratives you can know a character based on what they do. Their thoughts, motives, and morality must be judged by their actions. The Bible rarely evaluates the actions of its characters. When it does, those evaluations should be given careful attention. When it doesn't, the thoughtful reader is expected to hold the actions of the characters up to the principles of God's Word laid down elsewhere. John clues us in that Judas is secretly skimming off the top and that is really behind his supposed concern for the poor (John 12:6). The author of Samuel lets us know at the end of David's horrific adultery and murder cover up that the thing that David did displeased the Lord. The kings in general are normally given an evaluation as either good, bad, or somewhere in between. But normally the actions of those in Scripture, especially in the Old Testament, are left hanging. The author wants you to wrestle through whether or not the biblical character should have said or done something, using Scriptural principles and clues within the story to determine whether something is right or wrong.

This leads us to an important point: the Bible does not condone something simply because it includes it. The moral compromise of the last few chapters of Judges will turn your stomach. Good. It's supposed to. That's actually the point. But neither does the Bible condone something simply because a "good guy" does it. Not everything David or Abraham or Noah do should be imitated. Hebrews 11 is helpful when it holds these characters up for their faith. Follow the faith you see in the Old Testament, looking to the same God and trusting the same God, but don't necessarily follow all their actions.

- **Words**

Dialogue is very important for understanding what a character thinks or what they are like. Pay close attention to what everyone says. The Bible teaches that out of the abundance of the mouth the heart speaks, and so the speech of characters often indirectly tells us what's really going on in their hearts. Often, paying close attention to the dialogue will help you unlock the point of a story. When a character is given "the last word," this is sometimes included as a way of summing up the point of the story.

Careful students of God's Word should realize that there is no random detail because the authors of God's Word include only details that are necessary. At times, however, the meaning of a specific detail may escape you. Don't be frustrated if this happens. As you continue reading God's Word, hearing preaching on God's Word, and reading the works of others who done the same, you may come to see the meaning of a seemingly random detail. But don't reach to try and explain why a certain detail is given if you have to force it. Be patient and realize you have a lifetime of reading and meditating on God's Word to unravel some of these details.

Specific Principles for Studying Stories

Although all stories have a plot, characters, and a setting, not all stories work in exactly the same way. Let's take a few moments to work through Old Testament stories, the Gospels, and Acts. We'll ask what each section is seeking to teach and then giving a few principles for studying them.

OT Narratives

What is the point of these narratives?

God is working in history to accomplish his redemptive purposes. The authors of these books often had a slightly different reason for writing their book, so ask yourself why this author wrote this book. Why did Judges write Judges, or Kings write Kings?

Tips for studying these narratives

- Old Testament stories generally illustrate principles taught elsewhere in Scripture. Try to think of verses from the Old or New Testament that the story you are reading illustrate.
- Realize not every example is a good one! Don't put out a fleece like Gideon did, Gideon was failing to trust that God would be with him, even after God had already proven Himself to Gideon.
- Pay special attention to the details. Even more so than the New Testament stories, the Old Testament stories rely heavily on the random details you find.

Gospel Narratives

What is the point of these narratives?

The gospel writers are trying to present Jesus as the Savior of the world. While each of them take a slightly different spin, they all are presenting Jesus as being who He says He is and explaining why people should believe in Him.

Tips for studying these narratives

- The gospels are a hybrid genre. We find in them many stories about the life of Jesus, but we also find many of the teachings of Jesus. Many of the stories set up the teachings of Jesus, so ask how the two relate to one another.
- The stories about Jesus are meant to validate the claims about Jesus that His earliest followers made. As you read through the gospels, you should be asking, "Who is Jesus?" "What does this story teach me about Him?" While a simple question, it's a crucial one and will help orient you properly.

The Narratives of Acts

What is the point of these narratives?

These stories show the origins of the church. They focus on the work of the Spirit establishing and building the one, unified body of Christ throughout the ancient world.

Tips for studying these narratives

- The first 12 chapters focus on Peter and his ministry. Peter was the one responsible for the inaugural sermon of the church on Pentecost, at which 3,000 trusted Christ. He continued to be an influential preacher and saw many come to Christ. He was also the first to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, specifically in the story of Cornelius.
- The rest of the book shifts its focus to the apostle Paul, however, and tells of his missionary journey and of his later imprisonment and trials. Paul was a crucial figure for the spread of early Christianity.
- In many ways, though, the main protagonist is the Spirit. He leads, guides, directs, and moves in hearts to allow the work to go forward. Luke often emphasizes that prayer was crucial to the success of the early church, and this is understandable since it is the Spirit that builds the church.

Six Steps for Studying Scripture

Here we will combine the six steps for studying any passage with the specific principles for studying stories that we have gone over.

Study the Context

- **The historical and cultural setting can enhance understanding.**
Sometimes stories from another culture and time can puzzle us. When Sarah suggests that Abraham impregnate her slave Hagar, we are surprised. Why would any wife suggest her husband sleep with another woman? When we realize that having a servant serve as a “proxy” for a barren woman was a common custom of the time, Sarah’s actions, though inexcusable, at least make sense. In fact, this helps us realize the danger of the thinking of the world tempt us into making choices that seem logical at the time but will one day be seen for what they really are: bizarre and unbiblical.
- **The literary context is necessary for understanding.**
How do the words before and after it help us understand the meaning? This is very important for a story, because you’ve got to get the whole story for a story to make sense! Taking just a piece from the story will yield a different meaning! Remember, we want to keep the different levels of stories in mind. There is a single story, like Abraham offering Isaac, that plays into larger stories, like the Abraham narratives or the stories of the

patriarchs, which ultimately play into the ultimate story of God's redemption and restoration of humanity and ultimately all creation.

Observe the Details

This stage can be crucial for the study of narratives. Whereas modern writers will try to load a story up on details, biblical authors will only include details they deem to be absolutely necessary. When you read a description, an explanation, or an oddly specific statement, ask "Why?" When a writer takes precious time repeating dialogue word for word, something important is going on there. Ask "Why?" Look carefully at the details of the passage and ask "Why?"

Outline the Passage

Outlining stories will again look differently than outlining a letter. Rather than have main points and sub-points, and on ambitious days, sub-sub-points, tracing a story normally happens in scenes. General one sentence descriptions of the different scenes helps us see the flow of a story that lead to the point the author is trying to make. Romans outline from our last lesson was broken down into: 1. The Explanation of What the Gospel Is and 2. The Exhortation to Live in Light of the Gospel. An outline for a story will tend to look a little differently. Again, there are different levels of stories, and so we could outline all of the Joseph narratives, or we could outline the instance where his brother sold him into slavery.

Joseph Goes to Find His Brothers (37:12-17)

Joseph's Brothers Attack Him (37:18-24)

Joseph's Brothers Sell Him (37:25-28)

Joseph's Brothers Hide Their Crime (37:29-36)

Outlining in stories is focused less on deciding how the different pieces fit together as simply helping you to catch the general flow of the story.

Study Key Words

Doing a study on key words usually ends up being less important with narratives than with other genres. When you're carefully building a logical argument knowing exactly what a word is usually more important than when studying a story, which rarely depend as heavily on the exact meaning of a single word. The main help in word studies in these stories, especially Old Testament stories, is studying the meaning of names. Names often carry significance for the story. Abraham means

“exalted father” which is an odd name for someone who has no children. Jacob means “deceiver,” which is pretty accurate for most of his life. However, when he prepares to meet Esau again his scheming won’t be enough, and he wrestles with God in prayer and comes out a changed man with a new name “Israel” which refers to Jacob’s wrestling with God in prayer and prevailing.

Study the Themes

When you study themes in stories, you are generally studying patterns to see how those patterns line up with other patterns in Scripture. The Bible is full of these. What happens when someone meets God? What will be the result of a barren wife who wants desperately to have a child? What happens when a man meets a woman at a well? These types of patterns repeat throughout our Bibles, and picking up on them can help us see how God works consistently with different people.

Sometimes the biblical writers will turn these expectations on their heads. What happens when a person leaves the promised land because of a famine? Normally nothing good, as we see from the lives of Abraham and Jacob. So when we read in Ruth that Elimelech and Naomi leave Bethlehem to go to a foreign land because of a famine, our hearts sink a little. “Uh oh,” we think to ourselves. Sure enough, there is compromise (their sons marry Moabites) followed by tragedy (Elimelech and his sons die). But, then God turns this pattern on its head. Naomi returns, and is blessed by, of all people, a Moabite daughter-in-law!

Apply the Passage Personally

We’ve worked through a lot of details in examining how to study a story. We’ve seen the interplay between theology and history, examined characters, plot, and setting, and dealt with specifics of

1. Learn about God’s character

Too often our study of the stories, especially those in the Old Testament, can quickly degrade into “be like” or “don’t be like” stories. While there are examples of faith that we can learn from, the real purpose of the Bible is not simply to tell us how we ought to live, but to point out the great story that we all find ourselves in, the story of God’s work of redemption.

God’s Word is first and foremost God’s revealing of Himself to us. When we read the stories of the Old Testament, we are reminded of God’s care and providence through history, when we read the gospels, we are taught of the life of the most unique person to ever live, the One who perfectly demonstrated to us the character of the Father, and when we read Acts we are shown the power of the Spirit in building the church.

When you read the stories of the Bible, remember these stories are primarily about God, and not about us. Don’t just look for a moral truth like don’t lie or don’t be selfish, seek to learn about what your God is like, what He desires, how He thinks, and what He is up to.

2. Learn about human nature

At the same time, another effect of studying the stories of the Bible carefully is that we begin to see ourselves in their stories. We begin to empathize with their struggles. We start to realize how our thinking at times isn't all that different from their thinking. As we identify with the characters of the Bible we begin to see ways in which we need God's help to enable us to overcome the same flaws and unbelief they had.

Here's a hint, don't always assume you would be the good guy. As we read the stories of the Bible, we are often surprised by their sinful, carnal reactions. We can't believe that Abraham would be so cowardly as to allow his wife to be taken into Pharaoh's house. But how often do we compromise because we're afraid? Israel's repeated failure to trust God after God has repeatedly provided for them amazes us. And yet how often has God provided for you, and yet at the next tough point you once again wondered whether He could be trusted? We all want to be like David standing up to Goliath, and with the help of the Spirit we can have a David-like faith in God's power and a David-like passion for God's supremacy. But we also need to realize we have the same David-like tendencies towards lazy parenting, lust, or arrogance in what we have achieved.

Studying stories is a rich and rewarding experience. Thinking through setting, plot, and characters, as well as paying close attention to details can help us discover important truths about the character of our God and about our own sinful condition and need for God's grace.