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The Mission
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How to Study the Bible Lesson 7

So if you recall we've been learning the ten strategies to become a more effective reader with the intent to become a better student in the Bible. And so far we've looked at seven of the ten strategies for doing that.

We've learned how to read thoughtfully, repeatedly, patiently, selectively, prayerfully, imaginatively, meditatively. And tonight we're going to look at the last three. The first being to **read the Bible purposefully**.

Remember 2 Timothy 3:16–17, a passage we looked at in chapter 2? It says that all Scripture is given by divine inspiration and is “profitable.” In other words, it serves a purpose. And there we're given four main purposes: teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteous living.

So what does it mean to read the Bible purposefully. It means to look for the purpose; to look for the aim of the author.

Like I said before, every word is important and there's not a verse in the Bible that was thrown in there by accident. Every word contributes to meaning. And our challenge as readers is to discern that meaning.

So how can you do that?

Well, one of the keys to determining purpose is to look for structure. Every book of the Bible has both a grammatical and literary structure. First let's talk about grammatical structure.

Many biblical authors communicate their God inspired thoughts through carefully selected grammar. Now, as we all there's a trend in our

society today to do away with things like gender, whether it be in writing or in real life. But the original Bible language uses grammar purposefully for a reason. And that reason is to convey the truth of God and God's will for our life. And so we need to pay very careful attention to grammar. And some of the things we need to pay attention to include first of all verbs.

Verbs

Verbs are critical. They're the action words, they tell us who is doing what. But they take on different forms which are important to know when interpreting scripture. For instance, in Ephesians 5:18, Paul writes, "Be filled with the Spirit." Now that verb "be filled" is a passive verb. The subject of that sentence is understood to be you. You be filled with the Spirit. Which means this is something that's being done to you, not something you are doing. That's what makes it a passive verb. The action is being done to the subject.

He doesn't say, "Fill yourself with the Spirit." He's challenging us to submit ourselves up to the Spirit's control, to yield to His will. And so that's a very important observation when you come to this particular verse because Ephesians tells us what life in the Spirit looks like in the church.

Another interesting use of the verb is found in Genesis 22:10, where Abraham takes his son, Isaac, up Mount Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice: "And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son."

You can't detect it in the English translation, but a commentary will tell you that the verb here actually indicates a completed act, as if Abraham actually slays his son. And the reason is because in his mind, the deed is done; in his mind, he's obeyed God. And so that's crucial to understanding the purpose of this scripture. He's showing us Abraham's faith—faith which was illustrated by obedience. And just like Paul says later in Romans,

Abraham's trust in God was such that he knew that even if he did sacrifice his son, God could and would raise him from the dead in order to preserve him as heir like he had promised. And so we need to know the form of the verb.

Next is the subject and the object. You didn't know you were taking a reading and English class did you? But you can't separate the two.

So what's the subject of a sentence? The subject of a sentence does the acting, right? And the object of the sentence is acted upon. And it's important not to get them confused.

For instance, Philippians 2:3 exhorts us, "Let each of you regard one another as more important than himself." Now, the order of this sentence is crucial. "Regard" is the verb; and "each of you" is the subject and "one another" is the object. Here, Paul is challenging believers to imitate the humility of Christ. But the order is critical for us to get that meaning and make that application.

Another verse is Galatians 6:4: "But let each one examine his **own** work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another." This is for that fellow that calls himself a "fruit inspector". A lot of us have a tendency to inspect other people's spiritual fruit, when we need to be paying more attention to our own. And this verse tells us to do just that.

Again, the verb is "examine"; the subject is "each one," that's us as believers"; and the object is "his own work." So Paul is arguing for some self-reflection, which has an important bearing on this portion of Galatians. He is talking about believers intervening with other believers when they have sin in their own lives they need to be dealing with.

And then the next term is modifiers, and modifiers are descriptive words such as adjectives and adverbs. They modify or enlarge the meaning of the words they're used with, and quite often they make all the difference.

For instance, in Philippians chapter 4, Paul thanks the Philippians for a gift they had sent him. We don't know exactly what the gift was, but Paul encourages those who sent it with a promise he often repeated: "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (v. 19).

Now, this verse, many times is ripped out of its context and made to appear as if God promises to supply all of our wants rather than all of our needs. But it was never designed to increase our self worth. It's merely Paul's statement of confidence in God's provision. And how confident was he? Well, the modifier "all" is definitive: "my God shall supply all your needs," that means literally, "every need of yours." God never, ever shortchanges us. He not only supplies **what** we need, He supplies **all** that we need.

And then we have prepositional phrases. I mentioned a couple in our sermon this past Sunday.

Prepositions are the little words that tell you where the action is taking place: in, on, upon, by, through, to, and so on. Consider a few of the many prepositional phrases that appear in Scripture, and you will see how important it is to mark them when you see them: "in Christ," "in the beginning," "by the Spirit," "according to the Spirit," "in the flesh," "under the law," "by faith," "according to the Word of the Lord." They're important, so don't pass them by.

And then we have connectives. And two of the most powerful words in the Bible are "and" and "but". We saw how crucial the word "but" was in

Acts 1:8. But if you'll look up Numbers 13:31; 2 Samuel 11:1; Luke 22:26; John 8:1; and 1 John 3:17, and you'll see some more illustrations of the power and importance of this little word.

And just as crucial is “and”: “Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4); “Abide in Me, and I in you (John 15:4); Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:42–43); “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8).

Another important connective is therefore. Whenever you see a therefore, go back and see what it's there for. Romans is full of “therefores”. The Old Testament prophets use therefore extensively. Over and over the prophets state their case against the people, and then cry, “Therefore, thus says the Lord.”

And then there's purpose through literary structure.

In addition to grammatical terms and devices, the biblical writers communicate their purposes through literary structure. Now, even if you are inexperienced as a reader, you're probably familiar with literary structure. If you watch movies or television, they use the same ones over and over.

For instance, think how many mystery shows and action thrillers use this structure: (1) introduction of the characters and the setting; (2) committing of the crime, usually murder or robbery; (3) investigation by the protagonist; (4) evasion by the criminal(s); (5) crisis, such as a car chase or shoot-out; and (6) resolution, as when the perpetrators are led away in handcuffs and the protagonist gets the girl. That's a very common structure for screenplays.

Well, the Bible has literary structure, too, though it's usually a little more sophisticated. And when we get to Step Two, which is Interpretation,

we'll see how different kinds of literature use different kinds of literary structure. But for now, here are five kinds to look for.

First is **biographical structure**. You'll find that many times books are written around certain individuals. Like we've already learned for instance, in Genesis, chapters 12–50 focus on the experiences of the four patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Judges structures itself around the leaders of Israel in the period between Joshua and the nation's first king, Saul. In 1 and 2 Samuel, the narrative moves from Samuel to Saul to David. In Acts, the apostle Paul commands the action in the later portions of the book.

And then we have **geographical structure**. Here the key is place. The structure of Exodus depends heavily on the places that Israel visits on its way from Egypt to the Promised Land.

And then we have **historical structure**. Key events are the basis of historical structure. The book of Joshua is a good example. The book opens with Joshua receiving his charge from the Lord. Then the people cross the Jordan. Then they take Jericho. Then they face defeat at Ai. And so it goes throughout the book, as the people go in and possess the land.

The gospel by John is another book that uses historical structure as he documents the life of Christ. And then Revelation of course is where the Apostle John tells us at the beginning of that book that he's recording a vision that God gave to him of the events that will take place during the last days.

And then there's **chronological structure**, which is closely related to historical structure, and this is where the author organizes his material around key times. And there's a progression of time and the events of the

story happen in a set order. First and 2 Samuel like I said, use biographical structure, but they also use chronological structure. So does Luke and Acts.

And then lastly we have ideological structure.

Most of Paul's letters to young churches are structured around ideas and concepts. Romans is a classic in this regard. It argues forcefully and comprehensively for one main idea, and that idea is summarized in chapter 1:16: where it says the gospel is the power of God for salvation. Now, to present his case, he touches on other concepts such as sin, the law, faith, grace, and life in the Spirit.

And by determining ideological structure, well that makes it easier when you go to outline a book. Once you understand the central theme and purpose, then you can determine what each part of the book contributes to the understanding of that theme and purpose.

Now, when we get to Interpretation, we're going to ask, What does this text mean? But we'll never be able to answer that question accurately until we learn how to observe and answer the question, What do I see? And understanding the structure in order to understand the author's purpose is a very important key to answering that question. So we need to read purposefully.

Number nine we need to read acquisitively.

Probably most of us, unless we have a photographic memory or an extremely high IQ, when we read we forget 99% of what we just read in just a matter of minutes. But that's not really the purpose of reading. The purpose of reading is to retain what we read; not merely to perceive it; but to also possess it. And the key to doing that is to become personally, actively involved in the process.

There's an old proverb to that effect: "I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand."

And studies of that nature back that up: We remember at most only 10 percent of what we hear; 50 percent of what we see and hear; but 90 percent of what we see, hear, and do.

And so the key to learning how to study the Bible is to get involved in the process. And we're going to be doing that going forward. It's not going to help you just to read about the process. You can go back and memorize every word of every lesson and that won't do you a bit of good unless you put it to use.

And then lastly we need to read telescopically.

And that simply means viewing the parts in light of the whole.

The Bible is not a collection of parts. It is an integrated message, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Now, that's bad math, but that's good theology and also a good method of approach. Yet what happens many times when we come to the Bible in a Bible study or to teach the Bible, we keep breaking it down and breaking it down, until we have nothing but baskets of fragments, but we never put it back together again to show the meaning of the whole.

So every time you read and analyze Scripture, every time you take it apart, you have to realize that you've only done part of the task. Your next task is to put it all back together again.

And how can you do that?

Well, first you look for the connectives.

At little while ago we talked about the power of little words like but, and, and therefore. These are "connectives" in that they link the text

together. And to read telescopically means you pay attention to these links, so that you tie the author's message together in your mind.

Next, and we've talked about this before, you need to pay attention to context. We saw how important context was when we studied Acts 1:8. And we'll come back to it in detail when we get to Step Two, Interpretation. But the principle to remember is that whenever you study a verse or a paragraph, always consult the neighbors of that verse or paragraph to find out what the broader context is.

Telescopic reading always asks, What is the big picture?

Also we need to evaluate the passage in light of the book as a whole. That's the ultimate extension of context if you will.

And then look at the historical context of the book. Take the Christmas story in Luke 2 for example, which begins: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed".

Now, how many of us know or appreciate the fact that Caesar Augustus was the first emperor of Rome? How did that come about? Perhaps you've seen or read Shakespeare's tragedy Julius Caesar and know that Caesar was murdered in 44 BC. He had become a dictator. But previously Rome had been a republic, much like our own United States. A power struggle ensued in the aftermath of Caesar's death, and a man named Octavius emerged as the victor. A mere thirty years before Christ, Octavius was named emperor and assumed the title Caesar Augustus.

Another interesting fact is that Rome annexed Judea—the birthplace of Christ—in 6 BC.

So when Luke opens chapter 2 with reference to Caesar Augustus, he's reminding the reader of the extraordinary political changes underway at

that time. Does that have any bearing on his account? Does it give us any insight into the circumstances surrounding Jesus' life and death? Does it shed light on the Acts narrative, which continues the story? Does it give us any clues as to who Luke was writing for, and what might have mattered to the fellow he calls Theophilus in Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1?

Whenever you come to a book of the Bible, ask, Where does this book fit historically? When was it written? When did the events in it take place? What was happening in the larger history of the world at that time?

Also ask, Where does this book fit in the flow of the Bible? Does it come before, during, or after Christ? How much of the Bible was complete when this material was written? In other words, how much did the writer and the people in the book know about God?

That's where sources like Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias come in handy and we'll talk more about that at a later date.

Well, that's it for how to read. Next week we're going to work with a paragraph. We worked with one verse several weeks back, but next week we're going to take a whole paragraph and break it down. If you want to get a jump on it and look at it beforehand it's in Nehemiah chapter 1:4-11.

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Lesson 7 Exercises

Meditative Exercise

If you are not in the habit of reading the Bible meditatively, here's a suggestion to get started: Set aside a day when you can get away from your routine—no work, no interruptions, no commitments. Perhaps you have a favorite spot in the country or by the seashore, or access to a lake house. Wherever it is, find a place where you can spend several hours alone.

Devote your time to meditating on John 4:1–42, the account of Jesus visiting Samaria. Begin by asking God to help you gain insight into His Word and show you how to apply it. Then read the passage several times. Use the suggestions for repeated Bible reading in chapter 9.

Examine the sections before and after John 4 to place it in context. Then look carefully at the passage to answer such questions as: Who are the people in this story? Who were the Samaritans? Why was it unusual for Jesus to talk to this woman? What was the reaction of her neighbors? Of the disciples? What does Jesus tell them when they return? What lessons does this passage teach about telling the gospel story to others?

After you've got a grasp of the story, think about what implications it might have for you. For instance, what kinds of people do you normally stay away from? Why? How would those people respond to the gospel? Is there anything you could do or say that would help them come closer to Christ and ultimately to trust in Him? When it comes to evangelism, are you a

sower or a reaper (vv. 36–38)? Or neither? With which of the characters in the story do you most identify? Why?

How did you come to faith in Christ? Who told you about Jesus? What was your response? Whom have you told about Jesus? What did you say? What was the response? Are there principles in this story that you could use the next time you tell people about Christ?

You can come up with additional questions. The goal is to chew on the Word, looking for insights, and to examine yourself, looking for ways to apply Scripture. Be sure to write down everything you observe in the passage, as well as your conclusions. And spend time in prayer. On the basis of what you've studied and meditated on, what is God telling you? What do you need to tell Him? Where do you need His resources and help? What opportunities for evangelism would you like Him to open for you?

Purposefully Exercise

The books of the Bible are filled with statements that express the purpose of the writers. John 20:30–31 is one of the most straightforward. Others are less obvious. But an observant reader can usually find them. Here are a number of purpose statements. Read each one carefully, then skim the rest of the book in which it is found. See how the writer accomplishes his purpose in the way he presents his material.

- Deuteronomy 1:1; 4:1; 32:44–47
- Proverbs 1:1–6
- Ecclesiastes 1:1–2; 12:13–14
- Isaiah 6:9–13
- Malachi 4:4–6
- Luke 1:1–4

- 2 Corinthians 1:8; 13:1–10
- Titus 1:5; 2:15
- 2 Peter 3:1–2
- 1 John 5:13

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Structure

LAW

DESCRIPTION

EXAMPLES

Cause & effect

One event, concept, or action that causes another (key terms: therefore, so, then, as a result)

Mark 11:27–12:44 Rom. 1:24–32; 8:18–30

Climax

A progression of events or ideas that climb to a certain high point before descending

Ex. 40:34–35

2 Sam. 11

Mark 4:35–5:43

Ps. 1:3–4

Comparison

Two or more elements that are alike or similar (key terms: like, as, too, also)

John 3:8, 12, 14

Heb. 5:1–10

Two or more elements that are unlike or dissimilar (key terms: but, yet)

Ps. 73

Acts 4:32–5:11

Gal. 5:19–23

Dan. 2, 4, 5, 7–9

Contrast

Explanation or reason

The presentation of an idea or event followed by its interpretation

Mark 4:13–20

Acts 11:1–18

Interchange

When the action, conversation, or concept moves to another, then back again

Gen. 37–39

1 Sam 1–3

Luke 1–2

Introduction & summary

Opening or concluding remarks on a subject or situation

Gen. 2:4–25; 3

Josh. 12

Matt. 6:1

Pivot or hinge

A sudden change in the direction or flow of the context; a minor climax

2 Sam. 11–12

Matt. 12

Acts 2

Proportion

Emphasis indicated by the amount of space the writer devotes to a subject

Gen. 1–11; 12–50

Luke 9:51–19:27

Eph. 5:21–6:4

Jn. 20:30–31

Purpose

A declaration of the author's intentions

Acts 1:8

Titus 1:1

Malachi

p 126 Repetition

Terms or phrases used two or more times

Ps. 136

Matt. 5:21–48

Specific to general, general to specific

Progression of thought from a single example to a general principle, or vice versa

Heb. 11

Matt. 6:1–18

Acts 1:8

James 2

Acquisitively Exercise

Here's an idea for making a passage of Scripture your own. Turn to Numbers 13, the story of the spies sent by Moses into the Promised Land. Read the account carefully, using all of the principles we've covered so far. Then write your own paraphrase of the story. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Decide what the main point of the story is. What happens? Why is this incident significant?
2. Think about any parallels to what happens here in the history of your own family, church, or nation, or in your own life.
3. Decide on the “angle” you want to use. For instance: the report of a task force for Israel, Inc. (a business angle); a tribal council (a Native American angle); a political contest between two factions (a political or governmental angle). The point is, choose something that fits the situation and will make this incident memorable for you.
4. Rewrite the story according to the angle you have chosen. Use language that fits that motif. Make the characters sound real-to-life. Change

names and places to fit the style. (See Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Version of Luke on pages 110–11.)

5. When you're finished, read your paraphrase to a friend or someone in your family.