

Pastor Grady Covin
The Mission
December 11, 2024

Lesson 17

So in learning how to study the Bible, we've looked at the first step which is observation and we looked at it in great detail. And then for last several weeks we've been studying the second step which is interpretation. Now, in the step of observation, we're asking the question "What do I see?"

And in the next step of interpretation we're asking the question, "What does this text mean?"

And tonight in this lesson, which is still part of interpretation, we want to ask and answer the question; What type of literature are we studying? Before ever launching into a study of a book in the Bible, one of the very first things a reader needs to know; is what that book's author meant it to be. In other words, what kind of literature was he writing? What literary form did he employ?

And the reason is because literary genre is crucial to interpretation. Just suppose I randomly pick a text from the Scripture: Say

Psalms 139:19, for example. "**O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God**".

Or **Nahum 1:9**, "**Whatever you devise against the Lord, He will make a complete end of it**".

Or, **Luke 16:24**, "**Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus**"

Or, Revelation 4:1, “After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven”.

Well, unless you know what types of literature those are taken from, you’re in no position to determine their meaning.

And so in this lesson I want to give you a very brief introduction to six kinds of writings that appear in the Bible, and how those writings influence our understanding.

And by the way, this is only an introduction. For the sake of time, we’re just barely going to scratch the surface on this subject. The truth is, entire careers have been built on mastering the finer points of the various genres in the Bible, so there’s just no way, in the time we have, to come to a complete understanding of this subject.

So let me sort of put this lesson in context by giving you an analogy. Suppose we were learning how to read music, instead of reading the Bible. Well, as a beginner music student, you would need to first learn the basics about notes and scales and key signatures and other rudiments of reading a sheet of music. In other words, the initial aim would be to get you started.

And with some fundamental knowledge and skills, and a lot of practice, you would eventually be able to read all kinds of musical compositions, from say “Mary Had a Little Lamb” to the “Rock of Ages.”

And as your skill progressed, you’d discover a whole new world has opened up to you. And you would find that there are all kinds of music that sound very different, and are performed quite differently, and have different effects on different people: such as symphonies, concertos, tone poems, period pieces, occasional pieces, chamber music, marches, anthems, hymns, folk songs, blues, jazz, country, hip-hop and Motown—and the varieties are endless.

And every one of those classifications of music has its own style, or “rules” if you will, to which it must conform. So that’s what a genre is—it’s a style that characterizes a group of compositions. And the more you understand about a given musical genre, the better you’re able to appreciate the music of that genre. But no matter what genre the music conforms to, it still relies on the basic patterns of notes and scales and key signatures and so on. In fact, it’s difficult to fully appreciate a given genre if you don’t have the benefit of those basics.

Well, a similar situation exists in Bible study. So we’re going to learn some basics with which to get started. And by using these basics, we should be able to work our way through most any passage of Scripture in the Bible. But just like in the world of music, the more experience you gain, and the more you practice, the better you’ll become in being able to properly interpret all the different literary forms in the Word of God.

So don’t just rush past or try and make these basic rules unimportant. All Bible students need a method that will work with every genre before they move on to the more complicated steps of interpretation.

It doesn’t matter whether you’re looking at poetry in the Psalms, or the logically framed arguments of Paul in Romans, or the wisdom of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes, the basic method applies to each of these.

First we observe the passage using the basic principles of observation. Secondly, we interpret the passage using basic principles of interpretation. And then lastly we apply the passage using basic principles of application.

But just as in reading music, the advanced skills of reading Scripture accurately, relies on how well we master some of these core fundamentals.

And all of us can become better Bible students if we’ll learn more about literary form. The more we know about it, the better we’ll be in the

observation step. In other words, we'll be more aware of what to look for. It'll also help us in our interpretations by giving us a better insight into how the author chose to communicate. And then lastly it'll strengthen our application skills by helping us to understand the author as well as the culture in which he wrote.

And so let me give you the six major literary genres that God used to communicate His message.

Exposition

And an exposition is just a straightforward argument or explanation of a body of objective truth. It is a form of writing that appeals primarily to the mind. The argument is usually very structured; in that it moves from point to point in a very logical fashion.

Paul's letters are good examples of exposition. The book of Romans, for example, is a straightforward explanation of the gospel. Paul argues like a lawyer presenting his case before a court, and that's no surprise because of what we know about Paul and his training and education in those skills.

You'll notice over and over in his writings how he links together paragraphs and chapters with transitional, or connective words such as for, therefore, and, and but. He often uses rhetorical questions. He uses long, elaborate sentences. But he also uses short, rapid-fire passages that buffet the mind.

Expositional books are the easiest if you're just getting started in Bible study. Their meaning lies close to the surface in most cases. And they appeal to the average person's preference for logic, and structure, and order and simplicity. Their purposes are more easy to grasp; and they practically outline themselves. They also contain a well of truths that are almost inexhaustible.

And so the key to understanding a work of exposition is to pay close attention to its structure, and to the terms it employs, especially when those terms are repeated.

Next is the narrative and biography.

Narrative of course means story. And as we all know, the Bible is full of stories, which is one reason it is so popular.

For example, Genesis relates the story of God's creation of the world, the story of the Flood, the story of the tower at Babel, and the story of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. And then Exodus continues the story with Israel's departure from Egypt, led by Moses. And then Ruth tells the story of Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David.

And then in the New Testament, the four gospels tell us the story of Jesus from four different points of view. And then one of them even continues as the writer Luke, gives us his narrative in the book of Acts, which are the Acts of the Apostles. And then within many of those accounts, we have the stories that Jesus told to His followers.

And so the Bible is full of stories, which make for very interesting reading, and it also makes for very interesting interpretation.

And so how do we determine the proper meaning and significance of the stories in the Bible?

Well, let me give you three things to pay special attention to.

First, ask; what is the plot? And the plot is movement in the story. And this could be a physical movement, as was the case of the Israelites as they moved across the Sinai peninsula in Exodus; or it could be a spiritual movement, as in the case of Samson in the book of Judges, or Jonah in the book of Jonah. Or it could be relational, as in the book of Ruth, or political, as in 1 and 2 Kings. The question is, what development is there in the story?

And what is different at the end of the book as opposed to the beginning, and why?

Another element to study is **characterization**. In other words, who are the characters in the story? How are they presented? What roles do they play? What decisions do they make? How do they relate to each other, and to God? What progress or regress do they make? Are they successful or do they fail? If so, why? Why are they in the story? In what ways are they individuals, and in what ways do they represent others? What do we like or dislike about them? How are we like them, or what would we do in their place?

And then a third issue to consider is, in what ways is this story true to life? Remember that was one of the clues to look for under Observation. It's also a doorway to understanding. The stories of Scripture show us life as God wants us to see it. So we can ask: What questions does this story raise? What problems do the characters have to deal with? What lessons do they learn or not learn? What things do they encounter that we should be sure to avoid? Or how do they deal with things in life that are unavoidable? What do they discover about God?

Now, there's a lot more to be said about narratives, but if you'll start by asking yourself these kinds of questions, you'll go a long way toward understanding what the stories are all about.

And then next we have **parables**. And parables are closely related to narratives. And a parable is a brief tale that illustrates a moral principle. And by far, most of the parables in Scripture come from the teachings of Jesus. In fact, Matthew tells us that the parable was probably Jesus' preferred method of communication.

And that's easy to understand because parables are simple, and memorable, and entertaining. And most are rather easy to understand. They deal with everyday matters such as farming, fishing, travel, money, and human relationships. And parables are usually intended to have a powerful impact. They jolt the listener into awareness by using basic ethical principles such as right and wrong (the sower and the three kinds of seed), love and compassion (the prodigal son, the good Samaritan), justice and mercy (the Pharisee and the tax collector).

It's also worth noting that parables are a form of fiction. But that doesn't mean they don't convey a truth. In fact, they communicate a truth that can't be communicated any other way. A parable kind of sneaks up on people's blind sides, it bypassing their defenses and it appeals to their imagination and hearts. And then it compels us to see some aspect of life in a completely new and different way. If you want to see a powerful example of that in action, just read Nathan's parable about the poor man's sheep in 2 Samuel 12:1–10.

And then next we have poetry.

The Bible contains some of the finest lines of poetry ever composed. And of course some have become icons in our culture: **“The Lord is my shepherd,/I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1); “God is our refuge and strength,/A very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1); “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1); “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name” (Matthew 6:9).**

The distinctive feature of poetry is its appeal to the emotions, as well as to the imagination. That's why the psalms are so beloved. They express

some of the deepest feelings, longings, rapture, and pain of the human heart.

But when you study poetry in the Bible, you have to make sure that you understand the dynamics of Hebrew poetry. For instance, most of the psalms were meant to be sung, not read. They were composed for worship, and many include notes on what kinds of instruments were to accompany them. So even though we no longer have the music to which they were sung, you should still listen for how they sound (which is true of all poetry).

One of the main features of Hebrew poetry is its extensive use of “parallelism.” If you look through the psalms, for instance, you’ll notice that the majority of the verses have two lines. And those two lines work off of each other to communicate a meaning. Sometimes the second line will reinforce what the first line says by repeating its thought.

For instance, **Psalms 103:15** says,

As for man, his days are like grass;

As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.

Sometimes it will extend the thought by adding new information, as in **Psalms 32:2:**

How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit.

And sometimes the second line will oppose the first with an alternative thought as in:

Psalms 40:4, How blessed is the man who has made the Lord his trust,

And has not turned to the proud, nor to those who lapse into falsehood.

Another key to appreciating Hebrew poetry is to recognize hy-per-bol-e, which is extreme or exaggerated language that makes its point through overkill.

For example in **Psalm 139: 19-22**,
O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God;
Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.
For they speak against Thee wickedly,
And Thine enemies take Thy name in vain.
Do I not hate those who hate Thee, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against Thee?
I hate them with the utmost hatred;
They have become my enemies.

Now, that's rather strange language to find in the Bible. And so what's going on here?

Well, first we need to notice who David is talking about. He's talking about —“the wicked,” people who have shed blood, people who have spoken against God, and taken His name in vain, which are all violations of the Ten Commandments. In other words, they are people who have demonstrated that they hate the Lord. And in becoming God's enemies, they've become David's enemies. And so in a rather formal, and ritualized way, he denounces them with the strongest language he can find.

So here are some questions with respect to interpretation that you need to consider as you approach the genre of poetry in the Bible: Who composed this material? Can you determine why? What is the central theme of the poem? What emotions does the verse convey, and what response does it produce? What questions does it ask? Which ones does it answer, and which ones does it leave unanswered? What does the poem say

about God? About people? What images does the poet use to spark the imagination? Are there references to people, places, or events that you are unfamiliar with? If so, what can you find out about them elsewhere in Scripture or through secondary sources?

Next we have the Proverbs and wisdom literature.

One of the richest quarries to mine in the Bible is found within this genre. The Proverbs and wisdom literature, are where the writer assumes the role of a veteran of life and who has become wise and is willing to share his wise insights with the younger, less experienced, but teachable reader.

And of course, the book of Proverbs obviously belongs to this area. And what is a proverb? A proverb is a short, practical nugget of truth, which is most often concerned with the consequences of a course of behavior. And like the poetry of the psalms that we looked at earlier, proverbs make use of parallelism, especially the pairing of opposites. For instance,

Proverbs 15:27:

**He who profits illicitly troubles his own house,
But he who hates bribes will live.**

Or Proverbs 20:3:

**Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man,
But any fool will quarrel.**

Proverbs come right to the point. And most of the time, they're easy to understand, though they're usually hard to apply. Even so, they're very beneficial to your walk as a Christian.

Now, I will give you a word of caution, though: a proverb contains a principle, not a promise. A proverb tells you: this is how life basically works or normally works. But the unsaid qualifier is this: life doesn't always, 100 percent of the time, work this way.

Take **Proverbs 21:17** as a case in point:

He who loves pleasure will become a poor man;

He who loves wine and oil will not become rich.

The idea is that if a man squanders his time, and energy, and resources on partying and living the high and easy life, then that will eventually lead to poverty. And of course we think of the prodigal son and that was true in his life.

And the general principle we get from this parable, is that if you want to grow your wealth, then you need to apply yourself, and you need to work hard and live a disciplined lifestyle.

But is the proverb guaranteeing that hard work and a disciplined lifestyle will lead to riches?

No.

Why?

Because life doesn't work that way. There are just too many other factors that contribute to the creation of wealth and many other factors that can prevent us from obtaining wealth even if we do all those things.

But that doesn't negate the principle of the proverb. It just shows that the principle is intended to point us in the right direction, but it won't carry us all the way to our destination.

We all know a lot of hard workers who are not wealthy, but we also know of people who spend their lives doing nothing but eating, drinking, and being merry, yet they happen to be quite rich.

But that doesn't contradict the truth of the Proverb. That's not how things usually happen. And so the proverb conveys to us a principle and not a promise. Things usually go the way of the principle, but not always.

And then lastly we have Prophecy.

And this is probably the most challenging type of literature of all in the Bible.

Now, most often when we think of prophecy, we think of it as a prediction for the future. And certainly the prophetic books look ahead. But a more important feature is that of warning and judgment of God. And anytime you see the words, “Thus saith the Lord!” You need to pay attention.

The role of the prophet in Scripture was not so much to tell the future, as it was to proclaim the words of the Lord to the people. In other words, it was not to foretell, but to “forth-tell!”

In fact, the reason God raised up prophets in Israel, was because it had become clear to God that the people were determined to resist Him. And so He raised up prophets to warn the people of the consequences of their continued disobedience, in hopes that they would repent and return to the Lord.

And when you study the prophets, it is critical that you re-create as best you can, the situation. In other words, you need to bombard the text with the six questions we learned earlier in the observation stage. You need to ask —who, what, where, when, why, and wherefore. And then you need to ask; What is the main problem that the prophet is addressing? What images does he use to describe it? What is the response of the people? What does this prophet’s message tell you about God? What happens after this prophet delivers his message? Why do you think God included this book in His Word?

Now, there’s a special category of prophetic literature found in the Book of Revelation which is classified as apocalyptic. And apocalyptic literature deals with the end times and all the tragic events which will occur

on a global scale at the end of the world. And the language of apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic. Not only that, but the events that will occur will take place over a very short period of time with a very quick and dazzling display of light, noise, and power.

And as you already know, this leaves a lot of room for speculation and subjective interpretation. And so to avoid that, when we study Revelation, we need to pay close attention to the structure of the book. What movement is there from the opening to the close? What changes come about? Also, who is the material written to? What was the historical and cultural context in which the writer was working? How might that have influenced his method of communication? In terms of understanding the book's symbols, look carefully at the Old Testament for insight into what the author is describing. Rather than worry about a time line for future events, ask what implications this book would have had for Christians in the early church.

