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**Core Seminar**

**How To Study the Bible**

**Class 5: Other Bible Study Tools**

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Introduction

Last week we thought through genre. This morning, we’ll turn and look at some tools we have for Bible study. And we’ll begin with **the Author’s Intent**. After all, *have you ever seen a verse being used out of context? Can someone give me an example?* (example: Mt 7:1 – (“Do not Judge”). Whenever we approach a passage of scripture, we should always ask two questions:

(1) Why did the author write it?

(2) What is the context?

Knowing the purpose and context of a verse or passage will help you understand your bible correctly and prevent you from making some of the errors we just talked about.

**I. The Author’s Intent**

So let’s begin with our 1st tool, the author’s purpose.

Every book of the Bible was written with a specific **purpose** in mind, therefore we should interpret each part of a book in light of this purpose.

This means we would say that you can’t impose whatever meaning you want on a text. The problem with this approach is that the Bible is *God’s* word, not our word. Its overarching purpose is to tell us about him. And so we need to understand what *he’s* trying to accomplish with it. We know the biblical writers were inspired by God; therefore, **their purpose is God’s intention**.

So let’s take a look at some passages to see how to uncover the author’s intention. We’ll start with some where the author’s intent is easy to spot.

**Explicit and Clear Purpose**

[Keep us looking at our bibles]

Turn with me to the end of John’s gospel, chapter 20 verse 30 - John 20.30-31:

30 “Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 **But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**”

OK. ***So why did John write the book of John?*** [wait for an answer].

When you study the book of John, then, you need to keep this purpose in mind. It’s one reason why John is so explicit about who Jesus is (remember last week).

**Implicit or more ambiguous purpose**

So what if the intention isn’t obvious or explicit? In these cases, we should examine the text for clues. To try and understand why it was written and what the main themes are.

We talked about this in our last class on genre: When dealing with a NT epistle or OT Prophet try to answer these four questions to get a sense of the purpose (on handout):

1. Who is writing to whom?

2. What is the situation of the author and reader?

3. Are there any problems or issues that are being addressed?

4. Are there any repeated themes or a single idea holding the book together?

A helpful text to meditate on with these four questions is 2 Timothy 1.9-10. I want to encourage you to look at these verses at home. I think you’ll see that these verses are profitable just by themselves. But you’ll get more out of them, I promise you, if we understand how they support Paul’s main purpose for 2 Timothy. (In the 13-week version of this class online, we walk through this text so you can find insights into this passage there in class 8).

Remember: If you don’t understand the author’s purpose, you won’t often get the passage completely wrong (by God’s grace). But you’ll probably end up simply affirming a general truth rather than seeing the deeper meaning of the passage.

QUESTIONS?

We should always keep in mind that God’s underlying purpose in all of scripture is the revelation of his glory, primarily as it is displayed through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, when we sit down to study God’s Word, as we seek to discern the purpose and the context of a passage, we should do so with the goal of growing in our knowledge of Him in all his glory!

Let’s continue on and discuss two more important interpretive tools: structure and parallelism. They’re designed to help us break up larger sections of scripture to help us better understanding their meaning. Let’s start with structure.

**III. Structure**

We want to ask ourselves two questions when we’re trying to understand the structure of a passage:

Has the author divided his material into sections?

How do those sections fit together?

That first question is key. Not all portions of Scripture have an overarching structure to them. But when a book appears put together in a particular pattern or order, it’s important that we understand what that structure is. That way we can see more clearly what the author is trying to do at each point in the book.

**Finding Structure**

OK. So how do I figure out the structure of a passage? Look down in your handout and you’ll see a few tips for doing this.

1. Look for repeated words or repeated themes.

2. In narratives, look for scene changes. Pretend you’re a movie director or a playwright and ask yourself, “did the action just switch scenes here?” “If not, why did the author move me on to something different?” We’ll get to an example of this in a few minutes.

3. In dialogues, you can often divide the text up based on who is speaking. For example, in Job it matters hugely if it’s Job speaking, God speaking, or one of Job’s friends.

4. In some places the structure that’s used is the structure of a legal argument. Malachi is a good example of this, as is Paul’s letter to the Romans. In Romans 1 and 2, Paul establishes that everyone is under God’s wrath because of their sin, for Gentiles in Chapter 1 and Jews in Chapter 2, before he begins his argument about the free gift of salvation in Christ for those who believe in chapter 3.

So if you see a logical progression of thought, like in Romans, it may well be the structure of a progressive argument—and you would do well to trace out that argument.

Incidentally, you’ll find that the paragraphs, chapter divisions, and verse divisions in your bibles are generally helpful. But sometimes they’re not. Keep in mind that they’re not inspired by God. Often, it can be useful to print out the section of Scripture you need from a site like www.biblegateway.com so you can read it without verse, paragraph, or chapter divisions.

Using Structure

[Find a bible text as an example]

Once you’ve broken out your passage into subsections, whether based on scenes, or arguments, or themes, or repeated phrases, it’s useful to then give each section a summary title. This forces you to think about what the main point of each subsection is and write it down. Don’t feel like you have to be wed to your first thought; you can always change it later.

After you’ve summarized in a few sentences what each section is about, the next step is to see how each part fits together. As we said before, in a letter, the sections might be arguments that build on each another, or in the case of a narrative, the sections might contrast or complement one another.

Along the way, you might find that you’ve started to outline your section of Scripture. Often, it can be useful to go ahead and finish the outline. Outlining a chapter or even an entire book can be a great way to follow a flow of thought and see how structure reveals meaning.

Another thing that can help is to memorize a passage of Scripture. When you memorize it, you’re more likely to notice patterns of theme and word recurrence that give evidence of structure—at least at the chapter level. And you’re more likely to see how the author uses Structure to accomplish his purpose.

Seeing how the author has structured what he’s saying will help us see the big idea of the whole passage.

**Parallels**

We looked at parallels a little bit when we looked at the genre of poetry. We talked about the different types of parallelism.

Parallelism makes for nice poetry, but it also helps us grasp the meaning of the passage in a different way. It serves to give you two chances to understand something. If you don’t understand the first phrase, maybe you will understand its parallel.

Example: Isaiah 55:6

Seek the **LORD** while he may be *found*;

Call on **him** while he is *near*.

If you just read the first sentence, you may wonder what Isaiah means by “seek the LORD”, however the verse is explained further in the 2nd line: “call on him while he is near”.

“Seek the LORD” is paralleled with “call on him”, so how do we go about seeking God?

By calling on him, most likely in prayer.

So the parallelism helps us understand the meaning.

QUESTIONS?

Let’s move on to our next tool:

**V. Linking Words**

What are linking words?

Identifying linking words and how they work helps us understand the relationship between various phrases. This is not a new concept, right? Remember when you were young, and your mom said to you,

**Don’t touch the stove because it will burn you.**

Thankfully, in that situation your mom made it clear. *Don’t touch the stove*, and *It will burn you* are connected by the word *because.*

That word *“because*” links the two clauses together and tells us that being burned is the reason or grounds for *why* you should not touch the stove.

Linking words can be used a number of ways:

* Give examples… *for instance*
* Add information… *Furthermore*
* Summarize… *In short*
* Sequence/show a progression of ideas… *Firstly, secondly,… finally*
* Give a reason… *Because,* *For* (2 Chronicles 20:21; 1 Cor. 7:9), *If* (2 Peter 2:4-9)
* Give a result or purpose… *So that*
* Contrast ideas… *However*
* Distinguish… *And*
* Indicate a particular consequence of a preceding statement…*Therefore*, *Consequently, For this Reason* (Hebrews 4:14-15; Phil. 2:5-11).
* Make a statement conditional … *If* (Deut. 28:13, 15)
* Tell the purpose behind something or introduce the result of something…*So that* (Eph. 3:16-17; Luke 12:1).

Here’s an activity you can do at home to pull all this together: Read Titus 2:1-15 and underline the linking words. I trust you’ll find that the passage makes a lot more sense in your mind that way.

QUESTIONS?

An American author once observed, “Any idea, plan, or purpose may be placed in the mind through repetition of thought.”

This seems to me to be a correct observation of something already known by the Bible’s divine and human authors. The repetition of words, phrases and ideas within Scripture is one method of drawing the attention of the reader so as to highlight important—or even the central—points of a text. The repetition tool, like many of the other tools we have discussed, is not a skeleton key that magically unlocks all of a passage’s meaning; however, it does assist us in our study and can provide clarity to our understanding. Let’s briefly consider the uses of repetition.

Uses of Repetition

[Read through each of the texts mentioned below – have folks in their bibles)

* Highlights the main point (John 6.47-59)
* Reveals the author’s opinion/interpretation of the narrative (Daniel 3:1-7)
* Emphasizes the main idea (2 Timothy 2:3-6)
* Sets the tone/feeling of the text (Revelation 18.9-11, 15-20).

So up to this point we’ve covered a number of tools. Even if you employ all of the methods and tools we’ve discussed in this class, the day will come when you want or need to **go “deeper”** in your bible study. **This should be an encouragement to you.** It means you’re interacting with the text in a more meaningful way, you’re maturing in your understanding of God’s word, and he is blessing you with **an appetite** for even more in your studies. Fortunately, God has provided wonderful bible commentaries, dictionaries, and other resources for us to use so that we might plumb even deeper depths of his Truth.

**VII. Commentaries**

[Bring along a physical example of a commentary and a Bible Dictionary, and give a brief demonstration]

We’ll begin with Commentaries. Frankly, when many people think of Bible study tools, they only think of Bible commentaries. They imagine that all that is required in Bible study is to simply look up what is written in some type of commentary, and voila!- you are finished! You now know what the passage means.

Nothing could be farther from the truth! In fact, if you are going to use a Bible commentary it is best to **use it towards the end of your study**, rather than at the beginning.

Why? Because if all you do is use a Bible commentary all you know is the interpretation and conclusions of the commentary’s author—you will only be learning their opinions—and because you did not take the time to actually study the Bible for yourself, you will have no frame of reference, no way to judge the correctness of the interpretations offered to you in that commentary.

In other words, all you will be capable of doing is repeating what someone else has said, and won't even be able to tell if those opinions are correct! Far too much of what passes for "Bible teaching" today is nothing more than a passing around of someone else's views. So remember, study your bibles like we’ve taught for the last 4 weeks, and then look at the Bible commentary! We actually encourage all you do this, at some level, when we tell you to read the passage that is going to be preached on ahead of time. We want you to study that passage as we’ve taught in this class in the last four weeks, and then on Sunday morning, check your interpretation as you listen to the preacher’s sermon.

That being said, **why even bother with a Bible commentary?** They are useful for a number of reasons. First of all, the better ones are written by acknowledged authorities on that particular book of the Bible, oftentimes men and women who have spent years and years studying that book in detail. So they definitely have something to share!

In addition Bible commentaries often **give details** about the historical period, the culture, the language, manners and customs, information that would take you much time to compile. Often commentaries will discuss difficult doctrinal or theological problems associated with a particular Bible passage. In short, the better commentaries place vast amounts of Biblical research at your fingertips.

Commentaries are also particularly useful for **checking your own work**. You can check several Bible commentaries to see if others understand and interpret a Bible passage the same way you do. If recognized authorities are saying one thing, but you are seeing something different, beware! People who claim to have "a new perspective" or "insights that no one else has" are usually wrong. Make sure that isn't you -- check your opinions and conclusions against the insights gathered by the people of God through the ages.

Commentaries can be broadly **divided into three types**: exegetical, homiletical, and devotional." Exegesis" can be defined as "the *practice* of and the set of *procedures* for discovering the author's intended meaning," I have been describing exegetical commentaries in my remarks so far.

Homiletical (or "preaching") commentaries are much more self-consciously focused upon making relevant applications of the text to the modern, contemporary world, and they commonly refer to events, ideas, and movements in contemporary culture. As such, they often have an immediate relevance, but they also can become outdated quickly as the culture changes. Most such commentaries are weak concerning an explanation of the text's meaning, compared to exegetical commentaries.

Devotional commentaries are often similar to homiletical, but their focus usually is more individualistic. Often, they are very impressionistic, that is involving general feelings and thoughts, rather than on facts. Devotional often comment at random on individual verses or portions of verses, but paying little or no attention to their context. But some are great, like morning and evening by CH Spurgeon and for the love of God by DA Carson.

If you’re looking for a good set of commentaries, I’d recommend the following:

* IVP’s New Bible Commentary, Edited by G.J. Wenham, J.A. Motyer, D.A. Carson and R.T. France
* The Tyndale OT and NT commentary series, published by William B. Erdmand Publishing
* The Bible Speaks Today Commentaries, published by IVP

Are there any other questions on commentaries?

**Bible Dictionaries**

Let’s move on to Bible Dictionaries. What are Bible Dictionaries? Well, have you ever used a "regular" dictionary? You simply look up a word (which is listed alphabetically) and the dictionary will give you information on the various shades of meaning of the word, where that word comes from, examples of its usage in a sentence, etc.

A Bible Dictionary is a lot like dictionaries you already know about - except that the entries (words) are words that might be meaningful for the study of the Bible.

A Bible Dictionary has entries for Biblical people (like David, Abraham, Moses, Jesus); Biblical places (Jerusalem, Rome, Babylon, etc); Biblical concepts (like faith, repentance, sacrifice); Biblical events (like the fall of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Exile, the Resurrection of Jesus); and other types of information may be presented as well: outlines of Bible books, pictures, charts, diagrams, and the like.

The entries are usually brief—especially if the dictionary is only one volume—so if you need more in-depth information, you may need to check a Bible Encyclopedia, which is a lot like a Bible Dictionary, except that the entries are more lengthy and may also include lists of other references to consult on the subject (Bibliographies).

Why use a Bible Dictionary (or Bible Encyclopedia)? Its primary use is in researching specific Biblical subjects. A good Bible Dictionary will give you the essential facts, presented briefly; a Bible Encyclopedia will usually provide much more detail. Many commentaries and study Bibles may only deal with certain topics or subjects in passing. When you need to explore a topic in more detail, consult a dictionary or encyclopedia entry on the subject.

To choose a good Bible Dictionary/Bible Encyclopedia you should consider the following criteria:

REPUTATION: What is the reputation (reliability) both of the contributors as well as the publisher? What do you know of them? What is their theological point-of-view? Has the publisher released other reputable reference tools?

RECENCY: When was this reference first published? If it was first released many years ago, has it been revised? You need a reference tool that presents the most up-to-date information.

REFERENCES: Does this tool have Bibliographies that point you to more information on a subject? Do they quote (or cite) an adequate amount of Bible passages for you to investigate? Does it have indexes that cross-reference subjects to more than one location in the book?

RELEVANCY: Is this tool the right one for your needs? Enough detail - without being overwhelming? Does it require pre-requisite knowledge (such as Greek or Hebrew)? Is it a tool for scholars or specialists? Is it written from a particular perspective, or with a particular audience in mind?

Some popular choices in Bible Dictionaries/Encyclopedias would include (but not be limited to) the following:

* **The New Bible Dictionary** (Inter-Varsity Press, 1982). This is a very good one-volume Bible Dictionary, written from an Evangelical perspective. Many British scholars provided material for this dictionary; often those of us in the USA are not familiar with them, but can gain significant insights nevertheless.
* **The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary** (Harper, 1996). Also a one-volume Bible Dictionary, written from a less conservative point-of-view.

I hope that this class has helped to make this discipline more desirable, effective, and useful for you so that you may have many, many years of seeing in Scripture and the glories of God’s plan to save his people and judge his enemies through Jesus Christ. God bless you all. Let’s pray.