Introduction to Interpretation
Why Are We Reading? Positioning Ourselves to Understand

Introduction

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. John 5:39-40

1. Life is in Jesus, not in Bible study.

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

Illustration: Water from a faucet

It’s possible to know a lot of the Bible and not have eternal life.

It’s possible to have eternal life but experience very little of it at the present.
Three approaches to Scripture that hinder our fellowship with Jesus. ¹

The Jeopardy approach

The osmosis approach

The Hallmark card approach

The biblical approach –

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.  John 17:3

2. All the Bible points to Jesus

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

The New Testament Scriptures point to Jesus, but so do the Old Testament Scriptures.

John 1:45

Luke 24:27

(See Addendum: The Hebrew Scriptures)

¹ Thanks to Mike Bullmore, senior pastor of Crossway Community Church in Kenosha, WI for coining these terms in a lecture at the Pastor’s College in April 2003.
The Storyline of the Bible (see Addendum)

Genesis 1-2: Creation

Genesis 3: The Fall, Judgment, and the Serpent Crusher

Genesis 12-22: Promises to Abraham

Genesis 22- 2 Chronicles 9: Rise of Abraham’s Descendants (Israel)

2 Chronicles 10 - Malachi: Decline of Israel and the Prophetic Hope

400 Years of Silence

Gospels: Jesus Comes to Save

Acts – Revelation: Spread of the Gospel until the Final Day

3. True understanding requires a heart that is receptive to Jesus.

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

Humility is your greatest friend in Bible interpretation.

“Speak Lord, for your servant hears.” 1 Samuel 3:9
The Storyline of the Bible

Prophetic hope

Israel's History Declines
Kingdom divided
Israel destroyed by Assyria
Judah exiled to Babylon

The partial kingdom

The promised kingdom

The pattern of the kingdom

The proclaimed kingdom

The perfected kingdom

END OF THE OT

No word of prophecy for 400 years until John the Baptist

Promise to Abraham

FALL

Gen. 1 - 2

Exod. 12 - 19

Num. - Deut.

Judges - 2 Chron.

Era - Mat.

Gospels

Acts - Rev.

NEW CREATION

Ascension

Birth of Christ

Second coming

From Vaughan Roberts, God's Big Picture (Inter-Varsity Press, 2002), pg. 157
## The Hebrew Scriptures

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Source material: F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (InterVarsity Press, 1988), pg. 29
Basic Principles of Interpretation
Discovering the Meaning of the Text

An Encouraging Reality

God himself will help you understand what he wrote.

2 Timothy 2:7

John 16:13

Ephesians 4:11-13

Basic Principles for Understanding the Scriptures

Our task whenever we come to the Bible is to answer three questions:

- What does it say? (Observation)
- What does it mean? (Interpretation)
- How do I apply it? (Application)

1. Observation - What does it say?

   A. Start with a good English translation.
      1. Addendum: Bible Translation Spectrum
      2. Addendum: Why the ESV?

   B. Ask questions of the text to understand the original setting.
      1. Gather the facts of the passage.
         a. Author and audience

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1 Thanks to Mark Mullery, senior pastor of Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax, VA and Rich Richardson, senior pastor of Sovereign Grace Church of Gilbert, AZ for providing much of the source material for this seminar.
2. What are the words and grammar?
   a. Pay attention to the sentence structure.
   b. Look for connecting words.
   c. Are there any repeated or unusual words?

3. What is the literary context?
   a. Definition: The literary context is the words, sentences, paragraphs or chapters that
      surround and relate to the text.²
   b. Questions to find the literary context:
      ♦ Who is the author writing to and what are the main issues he is addressing?
      ♦ What is the author’s train of thought?
      ♦ What comes before and after this sentence, this paragraph, this chapter? Is this
        part of a larger theme that is being addressed or of a story that is being told?
   c. There are several layers of literary context to consider:
      ♦ Immediate context (sentences and paragraphs surrounding the text)
      ♦ Book context (the general flow of the story or thoughts in the whole book)
      ♦ Other books written by the same author
      ♦ Other books in the same time period
      ♦ Other books in the same Testament
      ♦ The storyline of the whole Bible

Hermeneutics I, September 2002.
4. What is the historical context?
   a. Definition: The historical context is the culture, customs, languages, beliefs and history of the author and his original audience.\(^3\)
   
   b. Questions to find the historical context:
      - Where did this take place? (Wilderness? Gentile city?)
      - When did this take place? (During the Judges period? After Pentecost?)
      - Are there any customs unique to the culture here? (Jews don’t deal with Samaritans)
      - Who was in power at the time? (Assyria, Babylon, Rome)
      - Where and what did people worship? (Ephesians and Artemis, Athenians’ “unknown god”)
   
   c. Tools that are helpful to find historical information: Bible atlas, commentaries (well-chosen), historical studies
   
   d. Caution: Not everything going on in the culture is relevant to understanding the text, and sometimes interpreters claim the existence of some historic cultural issues without solid evidence. Always look for keys to the historical context and the main cultural issues in the text itself.

2. Interpretation - What does it mean?

A. The Scripture “means” what the author meant.

   1. Definition: The meaning of a text is what the author intended his readers to understand by his words. The meaning isn’t what the reader wants it to mean.

      a. Treasure map
      
      b. Matthew 20:16 “So the last will be first, and the first last.”

\(^3\) Ibid, p. 31
2. Every text of Scripture has one meaning, but it can have many implications.\(^4\)
   a. Ephesians 5:18

B. Questions to get at the meaning of the text
   1. What is the main point?
   2. Why did the author choose to include this text?
   3. How would the original audience have been affected by this?
   4. What doctrines are in view here?
   5. How does this passage reveal man's need for a savior or God's disposition to provide a savior?
   6. How does this passage connect to the overall storyline of the Bible? How does it point to or reveal Jesus as the Savior?

C. Important principles for good interpretation
   1. Get past assumptions about what a text says or means.
      Luke 15, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Or is it?
   2. Each genre has its own additional principles for interpretation.
      a. Definition: Genre is a type or style of literature.
         - Luke 18:20
         - Psalm 98:8-9
         - Proverbs 27:14
         - Ezekiel 10:9-13

\(^4\) We will be able to learn many things from one text, but the meaning is still only what the author intended to teach us. There are some cases, like in prophetic or apocalyptic literature, where the text may have significance beyond what the author understood. It’s doubtful Hosea knew he was speaking of Jesus when God said, “Out of Egypt I called my son” (Hosea 11:1, cf. Matthew 2:15). Nevertheless, our goal is to understand what the author meant, and then discover if it had further significance to something else he did not intend by investigating other Scriptures that shed light on it.
b. Main genres of the Bible: narratives, poetry, gospels, parables, letters/epistles, prophecy, lamentations, laws, proverbs (wisdom literature), apocalyptic literature.

3. Be careful how you interpret words.
   a. Words don't have any inherent meaning. They only have the meaning we assign to them.
      ◆ Glurch
      ◆ Email
   b. Words have a range of meaning
      ◆ Run
      ◆ سياسة
   c. Word meanings overlap
      ◆ “I'll stop smoking” vs. “I'll quit smoking”
      1 Corinthians 13:8
   d. Key principle: Context determines the meaning of words.
      ◆ “He was cold, so I gave him my coat.” vs. “He was cold. He didn't give me the usual friendly greeting.”
      ◆ Genesis 3:16
   e. Therefore, beware of saying, “the word means this” just from looking it up in a lexicon! A word means only what it means in a particular context. The whole range of the word’s meaning is not possible in every context.
   f. How to find out what a word means:
      ◆ Look at the immediate context for clues about what it means in this situation.
      ◆ Then look at the chapter context, then the book context. Look for how the word is used there.
      ◆ Then look at other uses of that word by the same author elsewhere.
      ◆ Then look at the use of that word in the same testament.
♦ It may be necessary to look at the use of the word in extra-biblical writings from the same time period.

♦ Look it up in lexicon to find out the range of meaning. (Ideally look up the Greek or Hebrew word. If you don’t have access to that, then look up the word in multiple English versions to get the sense. This is where Bible software is really helpful.)

4. Because God is the Author of all Scripture, (it is “breathed out by God” - 2 Timothy 3:16), it is all in harmony with itself and contains no real contradictions.

a. Implication # 1: Therefore everything it says about God must be accepted and held together.

♦ Ezekiel 33:11 and Deuteronomy 28:63

Which is true? Does God delight in destroying Israel for their sins, or does he take no pleasure in it?

b. Implication # 2: The correct interpretation of any given passage of Scripture will not contradict the total teaching of Scripture on any given point.

♦ Romans 3:28 & James 2:24

Is there a contradiction between Paul and James?

c. It’s important to read through the whole Bible regularly so you become familiar with the scope of what it has to say. As you do this, the Lord will bring to mind other texts as you are reading.

d. Helpful tools for finding texts in the Bible: Bible memorization, Bible software (Bibleworks, Logos, etc.), Bible concordance, systematic theology books (Wayne Grudem recommended).
5. What is explicit should interpret what is implicit.
   a. Explicit = what is clearly known and obviously stated.
   b. Implicit = what is not stated clearly but can be implied by what is stated clearly.
      - Jeremiah 3:6-7
         Was God surprised?

3. Application - How do I apply it?

   A. Interpretation without application leads to self-deception.
      1. James 1:22-25
   2. We can deceive ourselves that we are growing in godliness just because we know more.
      But we haven’t changed until the truth has made a difference in our attitudes and actions.

   B. Questions to help with application:
      1. What issues does this passage raise that are relevant to your life?
      2. What kind of response does this passage call from us?
         a. Examples to follow?
         b. Commandments to obey?
         c. Sins to forsake?
         d. Promises to claim?
         e. Principles to live by?
         f. New thoughts about God?
      3. How does God invite us to experience Jesus by this passage?
Paraphrase

A paraphrase translation communicates the main idea of the text by saying it a different way, with less concern about following the original words and phrases. It is also called a “free” translation.

Examples: The Living Bible, The Message.

Dynamic Equivalent

A dynamic equivalent translation is a “thought for thought” version that seeks to translate the original words and phrases into the equivalent words and phrases of our language, while often rearranging the order to make it more readable.


Literal

A literal translation is a “word for word” version that stays as close as possible to the exact words and phrases of the original and with a minimum of rearrangement.


Translation Comparison

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<th>Translation</th>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Genesis 5:2</th>
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<tr>
<td>Literal</td>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dynamic Equivalent</td>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them &quot;man.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TNIV</td>
<td>He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them &quot;human beings.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraphrase</td>
<td>Message</td>
<td>He created both male and female and blessed them, the whole human race.</td>
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</table>

1 Diagram composed from a number of sources and represents the general consensus.
Why We Use the ESV Bible

The ESV is the Bible version Sovereign Grace Fellowship uses in preaching and in scripture memory. Other translations are profitable and consulting them is part of wise Bible study. However, we recommend the ESV as your primary Bible for a number of reasons.¹

1. **Reliability in the details.**

The ESV is an "essentially literal" translation, meaning that the translators attempted to render not just the main point of each verse but every detail of meaning. The result is a translation where you can trust every word, not just the main idea. This is a translation that people can preach from, use for careful study, use as a pew Bible in their churches, and use as a basis for personal and group memorization.

2. **Readability.**

The ESV is the "great-grandchild" of the King James Version, and while all the language has been modernized and more accurate ancient texts have been used, the ESV still has a similar English style to the King James and it retains much of the rhythm of language and smooth flow of wording that made the King James the standard translation for over 300 years. One test of readability is reading a translation aloud, and the ESV meets that test with a clarity, dignity, and near-musical quality in its words.

3. **Consistency in rendering terms.**

The ESV has sought to reach a new standard of consistency in translating the same Hebrew or Greek word by the same English word wherever context and meaning would allow it. This means that English readers will have more access to the repetition of key terms in certain books where the author intended readers to see the connection, and where readers in the original language already could see the connections. (Example: "owe/owed" in Rom 13:7-8.)

4. **Dependence on the main translation tradition in the English language.**

The ESV is not an entirely new translation but is a revision of the 1946/1952/1971 Revised Standard Version (RSV), which was widely recognized as a very reliable, essentially literal translation. About 8% of the words in the 1971 RSV were changed to produce the ESV. But the RSV was itself a revision of the American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901, and the ASV was a revision of the King James Version of 1611. But even the King James was an updating of several translations, such as that of William Tyndale, that preceded it. The advantage of revising a translation tradition in this way is that translators can keep what is the best in a long and rich heritage while still improving and updating whatever needs to be changed.

5. **Level of readership.**

While there is value in several modern translations that use a limited vocabulary and aim to be understood quickly even by youthful non-Christian readers, that has not been the goal of the ESV.

¹ The following points come from Wayne Grudem in an email to CJ Mahaney received on 8/23/01. They are taken from Mark Mullery’s Hermeneutics Lecture 8 at the Pastors College on 9/19/2002.
Rather, the translators sought to produce the ESV for adult Christian readers. This means that the ESV is able to draw on all of the incredible richness of the English language for rendering difficult ancient expressions as precisely as possible, and it also means that the ESV is able to retain the rich stock of doctrinal terms (such as justification, sanctification, and propitiation) that make possible more in-depth understanding of Bible doctrine.

6. Retention of metaphors.

When the original author used a metaphor, the ESV has brought that metaphor over into English wherever possible. For example, "walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:16) has not been translated "live by the Spirit," but the term "walk" has been retained in English, thus preserving the rich metaphorical idea of "walking" as a picture of the Christian life, and thus preserving the connections with many Biblical passages about walking in paths of righteousness, not walking in the counsel of the wicked.

7. Accuracy in gender language.

The ESV has retained words such as "man," "father," "son," "son of man," and "he, him, his" whenever there was a male meaning in the original Hebrew or Greek text. But it has used terms such as "person," "whoever," and "anyone" whenever there was no male-specific meaning in the original. In this way the ESV seeks to reach a new standard of accuracy and trustworthiness in the rendering of words related to gender.

8. Academic and doctrinal reliability.

The ESV was produced by an extensive group of some of the best evangelical scholars today, many of whom have published major commentaries on the books for which they made recommended changes, and all of whom are committed to the complete inerrancy of the Bible.

9. Sustainability.²

I believe that it is inevitable that the NIV will eventually move to a gender-neutral rendering. With this strong possibility lying sometime in the future, the ESV offers an alternative that provides confidence in the durability of the theological commitments behind this translation, including both broader evangelical commitments as well as complementarian ones. The ESV thus provides a translation that one need not fear will swerve into other theological roads in the future, necessitating yet another change in the choice of translations.

² This point was added in a subsequent e-mail by Jeff Purswell, dean of the Sovereign Grace Ministries Pastor's College. And he was proven correct. In 2005 the new version of the NIV, Today's New International Version (TNIV), was released, containing extensive gender-neutral language revisions. These revisions obscure the truth of the original texts related to issues of biblical manhood and womanhood. For this and other reasons we do not recommend that you use the TNIV.
Interpreting Narratives
God’s Story in History

1. What is a Narrative?

   A. A narrative is simply a story, an author’s account of something that happened.
   
   B. Narrative is the most common genre in the Bible
      1. More than 40% of the Old Testament
      2. Almost all of Acts and much of the Gospels

2. Common Elements of Biblical Narratives

   A. Realism
      1. They are historical stories with vivid and specific details about real events. They are not fables or mythical stories.
         a. Ehud and Eglon (Judges 3:14-26)
         b. Jonah
      2. The characters are typically not romanticized, but are described as they really are – both the good and the bad.
         a. Moses (Numbers 12:3; Numbers 20:11-12)
      3. Many of the characters are people of average social standing or even scorned by society.
         a. Rahab (Joshua 2)

   B. Literary romance
      1. For all their realism, the Bible also presents stories filled with the extraordinary, the divine, the heroic.
         a. Samson (Judges 14)
         b. Jonathan and his armor bearer (1 Samuel 14)

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1 Much of this session is taken from Mark Mullery’s outline at the 2005 Sovereign Grace Ministries Leadership Conference, with some modifications.
2. They show how the kingdom of God breaks into the mundane, everyday world of normal people.
   a. Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3).

C. A brief and plain style
   1. They don't psychologize the characters or discuss their motivation.
      a. David tells Joab to take a census (2 Samuel 24:1-4)
   2. They often describe what happened without explaining the significance of what happened.
      a. The smoking fire pot between the halves of the sacrifice. (Genesis 15:17)
   3. They describe what did happen, not necessarily what should happen.
      a. Elkanah, a devout worshipper who had two wives (1 Samuel 1:1-5)

3. Types of Narratives

   A. Reports: a brief, self-contained narration, usually in third person style, about a single event or situation in the past.
      2. Dreams (Genesis 37:5-11; 40:9-17; Judges 7:13-14)
      3. Epiphanies (Genesis 12:7; 26:2-5; Judges 13; 1 Kings 3:4-15)

   B. Hero story: a series of episodes that focus on the life and exploits of a hero. May include both positive and negative lessons.
      1. Life of Moses (Exodus-Deuteronomy).
      2. Judges such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson.
      3. Life of Abraham (Genesis 12-25).

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C. Comedy: a narrative whose plot has a happy ending, in some cases through dramatic reversal.
   1. Esther
   2. Joseph’s story (Genesis 37-50)

D. Tragedy: a story where the hero, through a choice he makes, moves downward into disgrace and often death.
   1. Adam and Eve
   2. Cain
   3. Saul (the king)
   4. Judas

E. Farewell speech: an address in the first-person voice given by someone shortly before his death.
   1. Jacob to his sons (Genesis 49:29-32)
   2. Moses to Israel (Deuteronomy 29:2-30:20; 31:1-8)
   3. Joshua to Israel (Joshua 23)
   4. Samuel to Israel (1 Samuel 12)
   5. David to Solomon (1 Kings 2:1-9)

F. Gospel: in a sense, the gospels are narratives of the life and especially the death of Christ. However, they have enough unique characteristics to be considered as a separate genre.

G. Acts: a narrative of interrelated events organized around the advance of the gospel and the growth of the church through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
4. Principles for Interpreting Narratives

A. Remember that through his skill as a storyteller, the author is teaching.
   1. Narratives are teaching truths through storytelling rather than through direct statements.
      a. “The writers of the biblical narratives seldom say, 'Now the point I am trying to make by
         this story is…’ Thus, the meaning of the narrative is more elusive for the reader.”³
      b. Compare Esther to Proverbs 19:21 – both teach similar truths but in different ways.
   2. Not everything in a narrative is repeatable, but narratives still teach truths that are
      normative for all believers.
      a. Pentecost - unique yet instructive

B. The chapter and book context is important for understanding narratives.
   1. In narratives, the meaning is usually found in analyzing whole chapters, not just individual
      paragraphs.
   2. Each narrative in a book is part of a bigger story in the entire book.
      a. Acts 6:1-7 – just a teaching on church government?

C. Look for authorial comments inserted by the writer that give clues to interpret the story.
   1. “*In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes*
      (Judges 17:6).”

D. Avoid moralistic interpretations of narratives.
   1. David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17)
   2. The story of the lost axe head (2 Kings 6:1-7)

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E. Narratives teach about the activity, purposes and character of God, not just moral lessons.

1. Look for the activity of God in the story.

2. Connect the narrative to the overall storyline of God’s plan of redeeming a people for himself.
   b. How does the gospel come into view?
   c. How does God’s kingdom (His people, place and rule) come into view?
   d. How does this narrative point to or reveal Jesus as the Savior of the world?

5. Case Study: Genesis 20, Abraham & Sarah in Abimelech’s Kingdom

Refer to Addendum: Method for Interpreting Narratives
A Method For Interpreting Narratives

Observation – What does it say?

1. Who is the author?
2. Who were the recipients?
3. When was it written?
4. What are the facts of the passage (Who? What? Where? When?)?
5. What is the outline/structure of the passage?
6. Grammar and Syntax:
   • Repetition?
   • Unusual words?
   • Indirect/direct discourse (i.e. quotations or implied dialogue)?
   • Authorial comments (i.e. explanatory statements inserted by the author)?
   • Key terms?
7. What is the literary context?
   • How does this passage fit into the surrounding paragraph? Chapter? Book?
   • Why did the author place the passage here and not somewhere else?
8. What is the historical context?
   • Where did this take place?
   • When did this take place?
   • Are there any customs unique to the culture here?
   • Who was in power at the time?
   • Where and what did people worship?
Interpretation – What does it mean?

1. In one sentence, what is the main point?
2. Why did the author choose to include this?
3. How would the original audience have been affected by this?
4. What doctrines are in view here?
5. How does this passage reveal man’s need for a savior? God's disposition to provide a savior?
6. How does this passage connect to the overall storyline of the Bible? How does it point to or reveal Jesus as the Savior?

Application – How do I apply it?

1. Why did the Author choose to include this passage in the Bible?
2. What issues does this passage raise that are relevant to the church today? Relevant to your life?
3. What kind of a response does this passage call for from us? Are there:
   - Examples to follow?
   - Commandments to obey?
   - Sins to forsake?
   - Promises to claim?
   - Principles to live by?
   - New thoughts about God?
4. How does God invite the hearer to experience Jesus through this story?
Interpreting the Gospels
Portraits of Jesus

1. What are the Gospels? ¹

A. They are four accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

B. They are not simply biographies (a written history of a person’s life).

1. They omit large sections of Christ’s life.


   b. They pay most attention to his adult ministry and particularly the last few weeks of his life. They are sometimes called “passion narratives with a long introduction.”

2. Typical biographical details are omitted.

   a. They don’t tell us what he looked like.

   b. They don’t describe his family life or develop his personality.

3. They contain large teaching sections along with many narratives.

   a. Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount

   b. Matthew 26-28, mostly a narrative of the passion and resurrection

C. They are best thought of as “theological biographies.”

   1. They combine teaching and storytelling to proclaim a message. Their purpose isn’t just to record history, but to teach the significance of that history.

¹ Much of the material for this session comes from Pastors College lectures by Jeff Purswell in October 2002.
D. The gospels proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior. That is their purpose.

1. The writers weren't just interested in facts but in preaching the person and work of Jesus.
   a. John 20:30-31

2. The stories, sermons, and other literary forms in the gospels are all intended to preach Jesus to the original audience and also to us.
   Mark 1:1
   Mark 4:35-41

2. Characteristics of the Gospels

A. They contain several genres of biblical literature.

   1. Narratives, parables (Good Samaritan), sermons (Matthew 5-7), prophetic literature (Matthew 24), hyperbole (“tear out your eye,” Mark 9:47) [exaggeration for effect].

B. They are written from different perspectives.

   1. The gospels are four individual portraits of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.
      a. Like four artists painting the same person.
      b. The “synoptic” gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke
         ◆ “syn” (together), “opsis” (seeing)
         ◆ They contain similar material. 91% of Mark is contained in Matthew. 53% of Mark is contained in Luke.
c. The gospel of John is different

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synoptics</th>
<th>John</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Follow Jesus’ ministry in different geographic areas</td>
<td>More focus on Jesus’ ministry in Jerusalem during periodic visits there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cover many of the same events</td>
<td>Covers largely different material from the synoptics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record many healings and exorcisms</td>
<td>No exorcisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contain much teaching in parables</td>
<td>No parables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A tone of intense, rapid-fire action</td>
<td>Meditative; fewer events, longer discourses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The writers chose and arranged their material as interpreters of Jesus’ life to their target audience, but also ultimately to everyone.

a. Matthew

◆ Contains by far the most instances of the term “kingdom of heaven” or its counterparts.

◆ Probably written to a Jewish audience, useful both to instruct new Jewish believers and to win Jewish non-believers
  - Aramaic words and Jewish customs not explained
  - Geneology of Jesus begins with Abraham, very important to the Jews
  - Contains the most references that link Jesus with the Old Testament

◆ Highlights that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills Old Testament promises and inaugurates the kingdom of God through his life, death and resurrection.

b. Mark

◆ Contains the fewest actual words of Jesus, and highlights his actions.

◆ Probably written to a largely Gentile audience, perhaps Romans.
  - “the fourth watch of the night” in Mark 6:48 is a Roman way of reckoning time.
  - Aramaic terms are explained. (Mark 5:41 “Talitha cumi,” which means…”) 
  - Jewish customs are explained (Mark 7:3 “For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands…”).

◆ Highlights that Jesus is the Son of God.
c. Luke

- Stated purpose is to provide an orderly account of church history beginning with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4), followed by Acts later.
- Formally written to Theophilus, but probably intended more widely to a mainly Gentile audience.
  - Theophilus is a Greek name (1:3)
  - Avoids Aramaic terms
- Highlights the plan of God for the church fulfilled through Jesus. (Oft-repeated phrase “It is necessary” shows the divine necessity of everything that happens with Jesus.)

d. John

- Stated purpose is that readers would believe Jesus is the Christ and have eternal life (John 20:31).
- Written to people who seem to be both Jewish and Greek-speaking, but we can’t be sure who he was writing to. It is a timeless audience.
- Highlights the glory of God being revealed through Jesus in “signs” of his power and “I am” statements of self-disclosure.

C. They are not necessarily chronological

1. Example: The temptation account in Matthew 4 and Luke 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3: “Command these stones to become loaves of bread”</td>
<td>3: “Command this stone to become bread”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: “Throw yourself down”</td>
<td>7: “Worship me, it will all be yours”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9: “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”</td>
<td>9: “Throw yourself down from here.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The information is historically accurate, but not always presented in the sequence it happened.
   a. Luke doesn’t use time connectives (next, then). He uses other conjunctions (but, and).
D. Material is often arranged thematically

1. Example: Matthew arranges the Sermon on the Mount together, while Luke places the teaching in different places.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Luke</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Beatitudes</td>
<td>5:3-12</td>
<td>6:20-26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“If the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again?”</td>
<td>5:13</td>
<td>14:34-35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You are the light of the world”</td>
<td>5:14-16</td>
<td>8:16-17; 11:33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. The writers don’t place Jesus’ teaching in contexts that he wasn’t in, or lie about the order of things, but they do present material in varying order to emphasize different points.


      “He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.”

E. Jesus’ words are not necessarily identical quotes.


2. Quotes don’t need to be exact in order to faithfully communicate what was said.

   a. Example: John says to Dad, “Mom wants to know if you are coming to dinner now.” Dad says, “Yes.” John says to Mom, “Dad said he’s coming now.”

   b. In the oral tradition of the day (when there were no tape recorders), quotations weren’t intended to be exact, just faithful representations.

3. Possible reasons for the differences:

   a. Greek translations of what Jesus said in Aramaic

   b. Reports of Jesus’ sayings in different settings that are similar but not identical

   c. Divinely inspired paraphrases that truthfully communicate what Jesus said

4. What we have recorded is inspired in its wording and its arrangement. We don’t have all the words Jesus spoke, but what we have is without error.
3. Principles for Interpreting Gospels

A. Read “horizontally”

1. Compare different accounts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Stilling of the Storm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 When He got into the boat, His disciples followed Him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves; but Jesus Himself was asleep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 And they came to Him and woke Him, saying, “Save us, Lord; we are perishing!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 He said to them, &quot;Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?&quot; Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 The men were amazed, and said, &quot;What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 And He said to them, &quot;Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Note an author’s distinct emphases.

3. Don’t blur distinctions, but let each one speak.
4. Questions to ask when reading “horizontally”:
   
a. If this account is found in other gospels, then…
   
   ♦ How is its context here different from its context there?
   
   ♦ What are the differences in this account from the other gospel accounts (e.g., word order, grammar, vocabulary, etc.)?
   
   ♦ Do these differences indicate anything specific about the author’s interests and purposes?
   
   b. If this account does not appear in another gospel, why does the author include it here?
   
B. Read “vertically”
   
1. Read a gospel passage in the context of the surrounding chapters, and in light of the themes of the entire gospel.

2. Some hints for reading the gospels “vertically”:
   
   a. Read large blocks to get a feel for the larger story and themes.
   
   b. Look for transitions
      
      ♦ “From that time…” (Matthew 4:17, 16:21)
   
   c. Look for groupings of similar material
      
      ♦ The “kingdom of heaven” parables (Matthew 13)
      
      ♦ The parables about lost things (Luke 15)
      
      ♦ Repeated phrases (“Blessed are…” in Matthew 5).
      
      ♦ Note common themes (Mark 4:35-5:43 – Jesus has power over wind & waves, power over demons, power over sickness, power over death)

C. Keep in mind that the gospels’ purpose is to preach about Jesus.

   2 Corinthians 4:6

   1. The gospels put the glory of God on display in the person of Jesus. He is the primary demonstration of God’s glory and the focus of our study.
2. Interpret each section according to the rules of its genre, but ask how each text supports and points to this larger purpose.

3. Look for what it says about Jesus before looking for what it says about you.
   a. Like a family portrait. Temptation to look for yourself first.

D. Ask proper questions of the text.
   1. How does this text show man’s need for a Savior?
   2. What is there in this text that would cause me to stand in awe of Jesus?
   3. What is there in this text that would cause me to love Jesus more?
   4. What is there in this text that demonstrates the all-sufficiency of Jesus for a particular area in my life?


   A. The “Markan sandwich” – Mark will take two similar things and put a story in between them, so the middle story sheds light on the two stories that surround it.

   B. Structure:
      1. Verses 20-21 – Jesus’ family thinks he is crazy and seeks to bring him home
      2. Verses 22-30 – the teaching on blasphemy against the Holy Spirit
      3. Verse 31 – his mother and brothers arrive

   C. Contrast made:
      1. The family wants to hide Jesus; the scribes strongly oppose Jesus.

   D. Point that Mark is making:
      1. There is not that much difference between marginalizing Jesus and attributing to the devil the work of the Holy Spirit. Strong opposition to Jesus and marginalizing Jesus are responses cut from the same cloth.
Interpreting Parables
Fictional Stories, Real Life Lessons

1. What are Parables?

A. Parables are fictional stories created to make a point.
   1. Modern example: “There once was a little boy named Joey who wouldn't eat his vegetables. All he ate was ice cream and candy. But his friends always ate their vegetables. As Joey grew up he was always sickly, and had to stay inside, while his friends ran around laughing outside. Tonight we are having broccoli.”
   2. Luke 15:8-10  "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

2. Characteristics of Parables

A. They use real life situations that the original audience could relate to.
   1. Luke 16:19-21  There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

B. They are fictional stories, so not everything in them would happen in reality.
   1. Matthew 18:23-24  Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. [10 times more gold than Solomon collected in a year. 1 Kings 10:14]

C. Parables teach by appealing to your emotions as well as to your intellect.
   1. Matthew 20:9-11  (The Laborers in the Vineyard) And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when those hired first came, they thought they would receive more, but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the master of the house…
   2. Mark 12:6-8  (The Tenants) He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.
D. They paint a fictional story that addresses a real life situation.

1. Matthew 21:28-32  *What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not,' but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, 'I go, sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.*

E. Parables are hard to totally misread, but also difficult to understand the main point.

1. “...for all their charm and simplicity, the parables have suffered a fate of misinterpretation in the church second only to the Revelation.” ¹

2. Luke 15 (The Prodigal Son) isn’t just about the loving heart of God for wayward sinners. The parable also addresses two wrong approaches to God and the one that leads to salvation.

F. Parables are intended to yield their message to the responsive disciple and hide it from the unresponsive person.

1. Mark 4:11-12  *And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven."*

3. Principles for Interpreting Parables

A. Don’t try to find meaning in every detail of the parable.

1. The early church fathers tended to allegorize parables. This method of interpretation believes there is a hidden or higher meaning than what the literal sense points to. Augustine gave the following interpretation to the parable of the Good Samaritan: ²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The traveler:</th>
<th>Adam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jerusalem:</td>
<td>The heavenly city of peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jericho:</td>
<td>The moon (signifying Adam’s mortality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thieves:</td>
<td>The devil and demons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stripped him:</td>
<td>Took his immortality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beat him:</td>
<td>Persuaded him to sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left him half-dead:</td>
<td>Living physically; but dead spiritually</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priest/Levite:</td>
<td>Ministry of the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samaritan:</td>
<td>Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound his wounds:</td>
<td>Restraining him from sin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ From Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth, 2nd Edition* (Zondervan, 1993), pg. 135
² Ibid. pg. 136
Oil: Comfort of good hope
Wine: Exhortation to work with a fervent spirit
Inn: The church
Innkeeper: Paul

2. Parables are like arrows with feathers and a shaft – everything about them is designed to get the point to a target. The details aren’t what are important, but the point hitting the target is.

   a. In the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10), the story wouldn’t change if the man had been going “up” from Jericho to Jerusalem rather than “down” from Jerusalem to Jericho.

   b. The third hour, sixth hour and ninth hour workers don’t factor significantly into the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20).

B. For most parables, there probably is one main point to discover. But there can be others as well.

   1. Jesus drew four points out of the parable of the sower (Luke 8:5-8;11-15).

C. Interpret the parable in its original setting to see how it impacted the original audience.

   1. Historical context is very important to appreciate the impact of the parable.

      a. Good Samaritan (Luke 10): The Samaritans were hated by Jews, and the priests and Levites held a place of honor. It was shocking for the hero of the story to be the despised person instead of the religious leaders.

      b. Prodigal Son (Luke 15): For a son to ask his father for his inheritance was an unthinkable insult, like saying “I wish you were dead.” It makes the father’s response all the more unexpected.

   2. Literary context is very important to understand who the parable was spoken to and for what purpose.

      a. The parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20) was a response to Peter’s question, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (Matthew 19:27) The parable teaches that God’s blessings are distributed on the basis of grace, not merit, contrary to Peter’s way of thinking.

      b. Luke 18:1 And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.
D. Look for how much Jesus interprets himself.

1. Mark 7:17-23  And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

E. Look for how the passage preaches about Jesus, which is the goal of the Gospels.

1. The point of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) is that God grants his blessings on the basis of grace, not merit. But within the parable is the reminder of gospel truths:

a. The landowner, being generous, chooses to give to the 11th hour workers the same wage as the 1st hour workers who bore “the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”

b. Jesus is the only true 1st hour worker who earns God’s blessing, yet God gives to us by grace what Jesus deserves by his merit.


A. Audience (Luke 15:1-2)

1. Tax collectors and sinners – the immoral people seeking to get God’s treasures by their disobedience

2. Pharisees and scribes – the legalists seeking to get God’s treasures by their obedience

B. Main characters

1. The father, the younger son, the older son

C. Facts

1. Younger son insults the father, wastes his inheritance in self-indulgent living, returns repentant.

2. Older son is resentful, expects better compensation for his faithfulness, remains unrepentant.

3. Father goes out to both sons inviting them to the feast.

³ Thanks to Tim Keller, senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, for his analysis of this text in a message in Glasgow, Scotland on June 19, 2005.
D. Representation

1. The younger son addresses the immoral and disobedient tax collectors and sinners.

2. The older son addresses the moral and obedient Pharisees and scribes.

3. The father represents God who pursues both kinds of people with his love.

E. Main point

1. There are two worldly approaches to God and they are both wrong – the legalistic approach (older brother) and the licentious approach (younger brother).

2. Therefore there are two ways to be lost and alienated from God – trying to be very good, and trying to be very bad.

3. There is only one way to approach God – on the basis of sheer grace (the repentant son).