

LESSON 3

Approaches & Assumptions

Having discussed in the last lesson what the Bible consists of, the kind of literature it contains and the implications of its composition, this lesson takes the next step into determining some basic principles for how to read. We will discuss different ways that the Bible can be read for different goals, and the important implications of reading the Bible in different ways.

READING AS AN EVERYDAY ACTIVITY

Even though this class is centered on Scripture, reading is actually something we do all of the time with all kinds of things. When someone or something communicates to us in any written (verbal) form, we automatically and subconsciously start making decisions about what is being said, and what is meant. Because the Bible communicates in human language, it is really no different than any other writing, whether that be one of Shakespeare's plays or an article in the newspaper, and so is subject to the same kinds of review and analysis of any other kind of writing. This allows us to briefly summarize some important things about reading that especially apply to our reading of Scripture:

- Reading is an active (not passive) skill that can be improved.
- The purpose of reading expands the deeper we read. Some reading is purely for information, but deeper reading is for understanding the mind of the author.
- Experienced readings allow the reader to learn by self-discovery rather than by instruction. This advances the reader to the point of drawing their own interpretive conclusions on the subject matter.

This in turn allows us to talk about an important principle of reading that we should follow in our readings of Scripture. The technical term for reading a text of Scripture up to the point of interpretation is *exegesis*. The word comes from the Greek verb '*exogeomai*' (literally, 'to lead out'), meaning 'to expound, or to relate in detail.' Exegesis describes the process whereby a reader critically assesses a text. The important point of this is that the interpretation is drawn out from the content of the text itself. It is an exercise in discovery of what the text itself says.

The opposite of exegesis is *eisegesis* (literally, 'to lead in'). This is a process of interpretation in which the presuppositions of the reader are brought to bear on the text, often with the

result that conclusions are skewed to only confirm those presuppositions. In this case, the interpretation is an exercise of imposing a human idea onto the text.

Because all human beings have particular points of view, and inevitable presuppositions, it is impossible to eliminate all of those from our practice of 'exegeting', or interpreting, Scripture. Nevertheless, an honest critical assessment demands that we be attentive to our potential blind spots in an attempt to find out what the text actually says, not what we want it to say. Our first purpose in Bible reading should be simply to listen to God's Word.

APPROACHES TO READING THE BIBLE

This class proposes 3 main approaches to studying the Bible. Each of these corresponds to a different goal on the part of the reader.

- 1) Literary – Note, the word here is not 'literally,' but '*literary*,' an adjective meaning 'pertaining to literature.' This way of approaching the Bible is meant to get you reading the texts of Scripture on their own terms. In its most basic form, this simply means that you read a book of the Bible as an independent unit, studying it for its own structures, themes and meaning. Importantly, this involves an attempt to understand the original intent of the author of the book. This approach can then be expanded out to read the entire Bible in a variety of systematic ways (e.g. reading through the entire Bible, reading the Minor Prophets, reading Paul's Prison Epistles, etc.)
- 2) Topical – This approach tries to use the Bible to provide information about a certain topic. This typically includes going through the entire Bible to gather information so that it can be synthesized to form a conclusion. This might take the form of a word study, or to answer a religious question. As hinted at above, there are potential pre-suppositions in this approach which could have pitfalls if the literary work is not done to understand each relevant verse or section that comes up over the course of the study. Nevertheless, this approach is useful and necessary for understanding the will of God.
- 3) Devotional – Application is the ultimate goal of any Bible study. Reading devotionally is done with a mind toward application. It doesn't pass over the informational aspect of a text that is prevalent in the literary and topical approaches, but it is a personal reflection upon the text with the goal of improving the reader's disposition toward God. Again, there are pitfalls with this approach if done without doing literary work on the text before-hand. Devotional readings can be done within one text of scripture, or across multiple texts based on what is being applied.

In the lessons going forward, we will consider the literary approach as a 'first-level' reading, because it allows the best opportunity for the reader to understand the text strictly in the mind of the author. Thus, most of our classes will take this literary approach to the Scriptures, focusing on reading a single book or passage for meaning. The exercises we do should help to develop a better understanding for the ways that this approach benefits anyone who reads and studies God's Word. With the principles and skills learned in those lessons, we can then take those forward to discuss topical and devotional readings as 'second-level' readings. This in no way implies that these are more or less important, only

that these require some input by us as readers to be able to gain from this type of reading. These 'second-level' readings can and do greatly benefit the reader.

ASSUMPTIONS FOR BIBLE READING

The points made above in this lesson and in the previous lesson lead us to a set of assumptions about the Bible to be made in this class. None of these are *necessary* assumptions to properly exegete what the Bible says in all cases, but all of them are critical for reading faithfully to the text as the inspired Word of God.

- 1) The Bible is able to be understood. Note, this is not the same as saying that the Bible is simple, or easy to understand for anyone or everyone who attempts to read it. Still, human language is a foundational element of almost all human culture, and to the extent that the Bible is written in human language, we can ascertain the meaning of the text.
- 2) The text of Scripture should first be understood according to the meaning intended by the author. This does not mean that the meaning of a portion of scripture cannot be applied to other contexts, but it does mean that such applications should be connected to original authorial intent. (The use of the Old Testament in the New complicates this somewhat, but we will address that in a future class.)
- 3) The unity of the Canon of Scripture is constituted in its overarching worldview and coherent narrative which tells the story of God's redemption of the world through the history of Israel, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.
- 4) Each book within Scripture represents a single contribution to this overarching worldview and narrative, and can be treated as having its own integrity in its teaching and purpose.
- 5) The primary figure made known in Scripture is God Himself. God is not a projection or construct of human social psychology by which we only gain introspective knowledge of ourselves. Whatever reflections we gain about ourselves through the reading of Scripture are only truthful in the light of who God is through his self-revelation.
- 6) The text of the Bible as possessed in its translation into English is sufficient in its representation of the original text of the Bible authors. There are situations in which this may not, or should not, be assumed, but since we are not working with original languages in this class, we will assume the sufficiency of the English text.
- 7) The Bible is written by men inspired to accurately reveal the mind of God. As such the Scriptures are true to the historical and spiritual realities they describe, and are authoritative for all Christian belief and practice.

QUESTIONS:

1. When you study the Bible, how do you usually go about it? Why do you do it that way?
2. What do you see as pros and cons of each approach to bible study outlined above?
3. Why is it important that the Bible be written in a form that all people can understand?