

Steve Whitacre
SESSION 3: GENRE MATTERS

Class Overview

“Now these Jews [in Berea] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.” (Acts 17:11–12).

"Raking is easy, but you get only leaves; digging is hard, but you might find diamonds." John Piper, *Future Grace*, 387.

Theologian Grant Osborne (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 21-22) says that bible interpretation is:

- Science:
- Art:
- Spiritual act:

Class Schedule

- January 17: What is the Bible?
 - January 24: Genre Matters
 - January 31: Context is Key
 - February 7: Find Christ
 - February 14: Interpretation Lab 1: Old Testament
 - February 21: Interpretation Lab 2: Old Testament
 - February 28: Interpretation Lab 3: New Testament
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I. Introduction

- Other resources for studying your Bible:
 - *ESV Study Bible*
 - "Look at the Book" (desiringgod.org/labs)
 - *For the Love of God*, Carson
 - *The Message of the Old Testament/The Message of the New Testament*, Mark Dever
- Major genres in Scripture
 - Law
 - History
 - Wisdom/Poetry
 - Prophecy
 - Gospels
 - History
 - Letters
 - Apocalypse

Keep in mind that most books of the Bible will contain several different types of genre!

II. Law

- Pay attention to the context.
- The purpose of the Law was to regulate the relationship between God and his people.
- Jesus came to fulfill the law. See Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 16:16-17.
- Conclusion: Jesus does not cancel the law, but elevates its claims on believer's lives. More importantly, he fulfills the law: he is saying here that the entire OT points to him.
- So, if you are reading a portion of the law, look for how Jesus satisfies the requirement of the law in that instance.

III. History

- Pay attention to the context, particularly to the who, what, where, why, etc...
 - Remember that historical narrative typically presents a retelling of events without commentary, so you have to determine whether something is good or bad.
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- We use didactic (teaching) portions of Scripture to interpret narratives.
- Biblical narrative is not *mere* history; it is *theological* history. Therefore, remember that historical narratives are not necessarily presenting patterns for God's people to follow.
- Try to discern *why* the writer decided to include this story.
 - I, _____, have told you this story about _____ because...
 - I, *Moses*, have told you this story about *Joseph's time in Potiphar's house* because...

IV. Wisdom/Poetry

- The wisdom literature (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon), together form a guide about how to live out the fear of God.

"Psalms teach us how to worship.

Proverbs how to behave.

Job how to suffer.

Song of Solomon how to love.

Ecclesiastes how to live." - J. I. Packer¹

- Pay attention to the context.
- We need to understand how poetry worked in the ancient world.
 - Look for figures of speech.
 - Identify the figure of speech. What is being compared, contrasted, visualized, or heightened?
 - Enter into the emotional world of the image.
 - Explain the point of the figure of speech.
 - Ancient poetry doesn't rhyme sounds, it rhymes ideas. We call this parallelism.²
 - **Synonymous parallelism** is the repetition of the same thought in two different phrases using two different, yet closely related, sets of words.
 - **Antithetical parallelism** expresses the same thought from two different and often opposite perspectives.
 - In **synthetic parallelism**, the second line completes or explains the first.
 - **Emblematic parallelism** uses a comparison using "like" or "as," bringing together two different spheres of life to make a point.
- Classification of Psalms³
 - **Hymns** are characterized by exuberant praise of the Lord, calling us to admire God's character and deeds. (Psalm 16)

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/september/ji-packer-how-i-learned-to-live-joyfully.html>

² These definitions are adapted from Tremper Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 99-101.

³ These definitions adapted from *How to Read the Psalms* by Tremper Longman and "The Psalms" in The ESV Study Bible.

- **Laments** are appeals to God for help in trouble. The trouble may be the sins of others against us, the consequences of our own sin, or God's seeming inactivity in the face of suffering. (Psalm 42)
 - **Psalms of thanksgiving** are offered in response to answered prayer and highlight God's saving acts. (Psalm 136)
 - **Psalms of confidence** express unshakable trust in God's goodness, attentiveness, and strength to save. (Psalm 23)
 - **Psalms of remembrance** reflect back on specific moments of salvation in the history of God's people. (Psalm 78)
 - **Wisdom psalms** describe how God wants us to live, often contrasting the blessing of wisdom with the folly of godlessness. (Psalm 90)
 - **Kingship psalms** celebrate the goodness of God as he leads his people, whether through a human king, the coming Messiah, or the ultimate King: God himself. (Psalm 2)
 - Penitential psalms ring with grief and sorrow for sin against God while appealing for a clean conscience and relief from the consequences of sin. (Psalm 51)
 - Look for any Messianic significance in the Psalm
 - Pray the Psalms
- Proverbs
 - Proverbs are short, pithy sayings that are truisms: insightful observations that are generally true but may have exceptions. "This is how the world tends to work..." However, some Proverbs are absolute, and are always true.
 - They require wisdom to be understood and applied.
 - Read regularly from Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes for a balanced approach to wisdom.

V. Prophecy

- Pay attention to the context. Know the background of the book. Remember that prophecy is more concerned with obedience in the present than predicting the future
 - Expect highly figurative language that is intended to evoke emotion. (e.g. outrage, disgust, comfort, hope)
 - Distinguish between conditional and unconditional prophecy.
 - Try to understand what the author is trying to communicate to his audience before jumping to meaning for us today.
 - Look for prophetic predictions that have been fulfilled.
 - Keep in mind the differences between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament prophecy.
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VI. Gospels

- Pay attention to the context. The gospels are highly selective accounts of the life of Jesus. They are Christ-centered biography.
- With each episode, ask, “What is the writer telling us about Jesus?”
- Next, ask, “What is the writer telling us by the way he puts these stories together?”
 - Parables
 - Look for the comparison.
 - Look for the unexpected twist.
 - Don’t press the details too hard.

VII. Letters

- Pay attention to the context. Remember that the letters were *situational*: they were written to address a need in a particular situation.
- To understand a part of the letter, read the letter as a whole, and consider how the part fits into the whole. “Think paragraphs.”
- Consider the differences that exist between our situation and the original audience.
- Look for theological principles that emerge from the text.

VIII. Apocalypse

- Pay attention to context. How would these verses have affected the original hearers?
 - Like prophecy, apocalypse contains highly symbolic language, but much more exaggerated. Really, closer to fantasy.
 - Watch for use of repetition and cyclical imagery that say the same thing from different perspectives.
 - Revelation calls its readers to obedience and answers the question, “Who is the Lord?”
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