

SESSION #4:

“WHAT AM I LOOKING AT HERE?”

INTRODUCTION TO GENRE AND CONTEXT

Introduction to Context: There is No God

Did you know that in the Bible, the phrase “there is no God” appears 15 times?¹ It turns out that angry atheist on the internet was right, time to pack it in and admit defeat. Not so fast. When we actually take the time to turn to those parts, we find something important: *context*. Context, as my old theology lecturer would repeatedly say, is king. Let’s begin by turning to Psalm 10:4, 14:1 and 1 Kings 8:23 where this phrase appears. What do we see?

Psalm 10:4 In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, “**There is no God.**”

Psalm 14:1 The fool says in his heart, “**There is no God.**” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.

1 Kings 8:23 “O Lord, God of Israel, **there is no God** like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart;

Are you getting the point? What is being said must always be understood with its immediate context (the sentences around it, who is speaking to whom etc.), and the broader context (who is writing the book, for what purpose, when is this occurring in history etc.).

New Testament scholar D.A. Carson often quotes his father as saying “***A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.***” What he’s saying is we can take a phrase out of the Bible to say just about everything. Think about it. If someone recorded all your words ever spoken, they could take the odd phrase here and there and make you say anything they wanted you to say. That’s because we often say things in a particular way for a particular purpose, and its not fair to take those words out of the situation they are spoken and applied in ways not intended. So it is when we read the bible.

Interpreting the Bible

When we read the Bible, we need to remember that it contains 66 books written in three languages over 1,500 hundred years by dozens of authors writing for diverse audiences in varying situations. While we

¹ In the ESV translation.



certainly believe in the clarity of Scripture – in that anyone can grasp the essentials of the faith – there is still work to be done in rightly interpreting it for ourselves. We need to understand the author's *original intention and meaning*.

One difficulty we need to keep in mind is that is that we are not the implied readers! We are second hand readers. That doesn't mean that God isn't going to speak to us through the book (go back and see session #1!), simply that the author was writing for an immediate context. Another way to say this is that the Bible wasn't written *to* us, but it is *for* us. Keep this in mind as your read. Knowing who we are as readers is also a significant step in proper interpretation. For example, as western modern people living in Australia today, we will have a particular lens through which I will read and interpret that can be hard for us to even identify.

We call this art and science of interpreting the text *exegesis*, which simply means *to interpret*. The word is formed by two other Greek words, meaning *to lead* and *out*. So *exegesis* could be thought of as leading the meaning out of the text. This is often contrasted with its opposite – *eisegesis*, meaning *to lead* and *into* – or to lead meaning *into* the text. This is where we bring our own preconceived notions and read our own ideas into the text in our interpretation.

Eugene Peterson writes: "Exegesis...is an act of love. It means loving the one who speaks the words enough to want to get the words right. It is respecting the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully."²

How to Read the Bible in Context

There are actually a number of ways to apply this principle, because there are a number of types of context we need to understand. The three major categories are *literary, historical and canonical context*.

Literary Context

This refers to the words, sentences, and paragraphs surrounding the passage in question. It shows us where the passage fits in the flow of the entire book it comes from. The question to ask is: why is this here and how does it contribute to the whole?

Example:

Consider Romans 8:1 "There is **therefore** now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

It is a beautiful and wonderful verse. The guilt of our sin has entirely been removed if we are "in Christ Jesus". We are free from all condemnation for our sin!

But notice the start of the verse – the word *therefore*. The first question to ask ourselves is, "what is the *therefore* *there for*"? This truth that Paul writes is crucially linked to what comes before it. We have to know what comes first and what flow of logic has occurred before this verse for the weight of it to land on us.³

Historical Context

² Eugene Peterson, in **Theology Today**, April 1999, p.10

³ Paul is likely here summing up his entire 7 chapters worth of ideas here, so to get the best sense of it, we need to know chapters 1-7 (or at least the summary).

This refers to the situation in which the book is written. What are the cultural, historical, economic, geographical, moral and social influences at play here? Being so far removed from the original writing of the text makes this a tricky job, which is why a good study bible is essential to help you do the background leg work to make sense of what you're looking at.

Example:

I've heard it said many time before that the reason everyone hated tax collectors in the New Testament was because they were greedy thieves extorting people to make a dishonest profit. That makes sense, and is largely true. But it also entirely misses the point. There is a very important reason as to why tax collectors were hated that is lost on us today without proper historical context.

The Roman empire occupied the nation of Israel, and maintained their rule through utter brutality. So for a Jewish man to become a tax collector was not simply a case of them stealing from people, they were *collaborators* with the enemy. They were *traitors*. Imagine Jews in Poland helping raise funds for the occupying Nazi army in WWII – it would be an unthinkable betrayal!

Tax collectors were working for those who had destroyed the lives of so many by raising funds for them, and were making a tidy profit doing so. When you understand this, you understand the utter disgust people had for tax collectors, but you also get an insight into the radical grace of Jesus that extends kindness, mercy and forgiveness to these people.

Canonical Context

Finally, to make sense of an idea or passage in the Bible, we need to think about how it fits into the broader canon of Scripture, or in another words, its redemptive-history context. Am I reading Old or New Testament here? What does that change? Where in redemptive history is this event or teaching taking place? Where is it in the story in relation to me today?

Example:

For example, Psalm 51 is a beautiful psalm of confession and repentance before God. Consider the following:

Psalm 51:1-1, 7

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

...

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.



This psalm is written by King David after his great sin with Bathsheba. Like all the psalms, its canonical context is *pre-Christ*. This means that our understanding of Jesus dying for our sin was not yet understood by David at the time. Despite this, we might notice David's *confidence* in God's forgiveness. He calls upon the abundant mercy of God to wash him clean and blot out his failures. He knows that God needs to wash him because he can't do it himself. He knows he needs God to do something to rescue him from his sin. Although he didn't know it with the clarity we do, he knew that it would take an act of mercy by God to restore him.

For us today, we like David can pray this kind of prayer with even more confidence, because we know *exactly* what it is that God has done to save us. We know just how willing God is to invite us in and restore us when we stumble and fall. Understanding the canonical context will help us make sense of what we are reading in its fullest sense.

Introduction to Genre

Having a handle on the concept of genre is important, because whether we know it or not, genre governs everything we read. For example, if we open up a book and read "Once upon a time", it will trigger a particular framework to understand everything that comes next. We are trained to recognise these kind of markers in a text which then triggers a reading strategy, even if this is entirely subconscious.

The most basic breakdown of genre of the Bible would be into two parts: Narrative and Discourse. In that breakdown, narrative would make up 43%, and discourse the remaining 57%.

The Bible project divide discourse up into two parts, poetry and prose discourse, resulting in a breakdown of around 43% narrative, 32% poetry, and 25% prose discourse.

But for our purposes, we will categorize things a bit differently so we can apply a bit more detail:

1. **Narrative**
2. **Poetry**
3. **Prophecy**
4. **Law**
5. **Gospels**
6. **Epistles**

It might be helpful to point out that prophecy, gospels and epistles all contain a bit of a mix of poetry, narrative and discourse⁴, so its always important to ask yourself, what exactly am I reading here?

Bible Project: Literary Styles in the Bible

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUXJ8Owes8E>

⁴ And in the case of the gospels, prophecy as well.

#1 Narrative

Key Ideas when Reading Biblical Narrative:

Descriptive not Prescriptive

The most important thing to remember when reading narrative is that it is the author telling you something that happened (*descriptive*), and often not telling you to go and imitate that action (*prescriptive*). Much of the time, an event takes place without any moral commentary made along with it. We are perhaps a bit used to reading the Bible like moralistic Sunday School stories – a simple story with a simple moral take away. While this is how we should read the parables of Jesus, it is a bad way to read historical narrative. When we read with this expectation, we can get very disorientated by the evil things people do and wonder if God condones such behavior. Which leads me to my next point...

Narrative is often Complex rather than Simplistic

Biblical narrative is actually quite complex. We often want the simple good vs evil story, but we discover very quickly that even the “good” guys are not particularly good. The narrative sections of the bible capture well the realistic nature of life, the truth about the failure of people to live consistently good lives, and the devastation that sin has on the world and relationships. This doesn’t mean there is nothing to learn from the heroes of the Bible, just that it may take more reflection than we first may have anticipated.

Example of Narrative

Take the example below of 1 Samuel 17 for a typical case of biblical narrative. Read through the story with an eye on the following questions:

- Who are the characters? What information does the author give about them that may be significant to interpreting the story?
- What is the plot, tension point or source of conflict?
- What is the setting? How might that factor in or colour my reading?
- Does the narrative have a single point? How might we boil it down to a single sentence summary?

On top of these details that fall out of a careful reading of the text itself, are the standard questions concerning context that you must always ask:

- *Literary Context*: What has just come before this that might influence my interpretation of this narrative? Is this part of a greater whole?
- *Historical Context*: What is going on in this point of history? What are the cultural, historical, economic, geographical, moral and social influences at play here?
- *Canonical Context*: Where does this fit canonically? Where does this fit in the big story in relation to Jesus? How does it relate to him?

So what do we need to know going into 1 Samuel 17?

David has just been introduced as successor for Saul, who has now disqualified himself as king. IN chapter 15, the LORD rejected Saul. In chapter 16, David was anointed king. The story of David and Goliath then

acts as a case study for the contrast of the two men: on the one hand, Saul lacked faith, while David trusts God and receives his protection and blessing.

1 Samuel 17 David and Goliath

¹⁷ Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. And they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim. ² And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered, and encamped in the Valley of Elah, and drew up in line of battle against the Philistines. ³ And the Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them. ⁴ And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. ⁵ He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. ⁶ And he had bronze armor on his legs, and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. ⁷ The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron. And his shield-bearer went before him. ⁸ He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. ⁹ If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." ¹⁰ And the Philistine said, "I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together." ¹¹ When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

¹² Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years. ¹³ The three oldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle. And the names of his three sons who went to the battle were Eliab the firstborn, and next to him Abinadab, and the third Shammah. ¹⁴ David was the youngest. The three eldest followed Saul, ¹⁵ but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem. ¹⁶ For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening.

¹⁷ And Jesse said to David his son, "Take for your brothers an ephah of this parched grain, and these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers. ¹⁸ Also take these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand. See if your brothers are well, and bring some token from them."

¹⁹ Now Saul and they and all the men of Israel were in the Valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. ²⁰ And David rose early in the morning and left the sheep with a keeper and took the provisions and went, as Jesse had commanded him. And he came to the encampment as the host was going out to the battle line, shouting the war cry. ²¹ And Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. ²² And David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage and ran to the ranks and went and greeted his brothers. ²³ As he talked with them, behold, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him.

²⁴ All the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were much afraid. ²⁵ And the men of Israel said, "Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. And the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches and will give him his

daughter and make his father's house free in Israel.” ²⁶ And David said to the men who stood by him, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” ²⁷ And the people answered him in the same way, “So shall it be done to the man who kills him.”

²⁸ Now Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spoke to the men. And Eliab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, “Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle.” ²⁹ And David said, “What have I done now? Was it not but a word?” ³⁰ And he turned away from him toward another, and spoke in the same way, and the people answered him again as before.

³¹ When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul, and he sent for him. ³² And David said to Saul, “Let no man's heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” ³³ And Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.” ³⁴ But David said to Saul, “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, ³⁵ I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. ³⁶ Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.” ³⁷ And David said, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you!”

³⁸ Then Saul clothed David with his armor. He put a helmet of bronze on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail, ³⁹ and David strapped his sword over his armor. And he tried in vain to go, for he had not tested them. Then David said to Saul, “I cannot go with these, for I have not tested them.” So David put them off. ⁴⁰ Then he took his staff in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the brook and put them in his shepherd's pouch. His sling was in his hand, and he approached the Philistine.

⁴¹ And the Philistine moved forward and came near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. ⁴² And when the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. ⁴³ And the Philistine said to David, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴ The Philistine said to David, “Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field.” ⁴⁵ Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. ⁴⁶ This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, ⁴⁷ and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand.”

⁴⁸ When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹ And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground.

⁵⁰ So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. There was no sword in the hand of David. ⁵¹ Then David ran and stood over the Philistine and took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him and cut off his head with it. When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. ⁵² And the men of Israel and Judah rose with a shout and pursued the Philistines as far as Gath^[f] and the gates of Ekron, so that the wounded Philistines fell on the way from Shaaraim as far as Gath and Ekron. ⁵³ And the people of Israel came back from chasing the Philistines, and they plundered their camp. ⁵⁴ And David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem, but he put his armor in his tent.

⁵⁵ As soon as Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, "Abner, whose son is this youth?" And Abner said, "As your soul lives, O king, I do not know." ⁵⁶ And the king said, "Inquire whose son the boy is." ⁵⁷ And as soon as David returned from the striking down of the Philistine, Abner took him, and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand. ⁵⁸ And Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?" And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite."

Bible Project Video: Plot in Narrative

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLFCE8z_hw

Bible Project Video: Character in Narrative

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EQDGax19xk>

Bible Project Video: Plot in Narrative

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FuT8WtoAK0>

Bible Project Video: Design Patterns in Narrative

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rkqsQpck8YU&t=2s>

#2 Poetry

Key Ideas when Reading Biblical Poetry:

Is this Literal?

The hardest thing about poetry is that it says what it means by saying something that it doesn't mean. Confused? Me too. But this is how language works. English is full of metaphor and idiom that makes no sense when interpreted literally, but it is still intended to be understood by the reader in a particular way. For example, the phrase "cold feet" is about a feeling of hesitation to go through with something, not about

the temperature of your toes. To be “under the weather” is to be sick, not to be in the rain. And so on. My point is this, real meaning is intended by these idioms. Poetry prefers to communicate in metaphor, images and abstractions rather than literal concrete straightforward terms. It takes thought and interpretation.

Biblical Poetry is Different to Modern Poetry

All cultures through time use poetry, however they all use it very differently. Poetry in the Bible is very distinct from modern poetry – it doesn’t use meter or rhyme, but rather often will form in couplets. Couplets are parallel statements or phrases that go together, either to contrast, rephrase or built up each other. For example, in Psalm 145:1-3 we see three groups of couplets:

I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name for ever and ever.
² Every day I will bless you
and praise your name for ever and ever.
³ Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable.

This is a very common way that Hebrew poetry is framed.

Common Types of Poetic devices⁵

Term	Explanation	Example
<i>Image</i>	A word or phrase that names a concrete action or thing; by extension, a character, setting, or event in a story is an image – a concrete embodiment of human experience or an idea.	The way (or path); the congregation (or assembly); nature (or harvest) (Psalm 1)
<i>Metaphor</i>	An implied comparison that does not use the formula <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .	“the LORD is my shepherd” (Ps. 23:1)
<i>Simile</i>	A figure of speech in which a writer compares two things using the formula <i>like</i> or <i>as</i> .	“He is like a tree planted by streams of water” (Ps. 1:3)
<i>Personification</i>	A figure of speech in which human attributes are given to something nonhuman, such as animals, objects or abstract qualities.	Light and truth are personified as guides in Ps. 43:3
<i>Hyperbole</i>	A figure of speech in which a writer consciously exaggerates for the sake of effect using that effect is emotional, and thus, loosely put, hyperbole usually expresses emotional truth rather than literal truth.	“My tears have been my food day and night” (Ps. 42:3)

Example of Poetry

Take the example below of Psalm 23 for a typical case of biblical poetry. Read through the psalm with an eye on the following questions:

- What is the overriding theme, idea, image or metaphor?
- How is it developed?
- What might all this mean for the meaning of the poem?

⁵ ESV Study Bible, 940

On top of these details that fall out of a careful reading of the text itself, are the standard questions concerning context that you must always ask:

- *Literary Context*: What has just come before this that might influence my interpretation of this narrative? Is this part of a greater whole?
- *Historical Context*: What is going on in this point of history? What are the cultural, historical, economic, geographical, moral and social influences at play here?
- *Canonical Context*: Where does this fit canonically? Where does this fit in the big story in relation to Jesus? How does it relate to him?

Example Text:

Psalm 23 The Lord Is My Shepherd

A Psalm of David.

23 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

³ He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

Bible Project Video: The Art of Biblical Poetry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9yp1ZXbsEg>

Bible Project Video: Metaphor in Biblical Poetry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9W5afjndtU>



#3 Prophecy

Some helpful quotes to get us started:

"More individual books of the Bible come under the heading of prophecy than under any other heading."⁶

"We should note at the outset that the prophetic books are among the most difficult parts of the Bible to interpret or read with understanding."⁷

"Less than 2% of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5% specifically describes the new covenant age. Less than 1% concerns events yet to come in our time."⁸

Good to know:

The ministry of the "writing prophets" only spans 300 years from 760-460 BC.⁹

Forms of prophecy that appear in the Bible: "Lawsuit," "Woe," "Promise," "Enactment," "Thus says the LORD."¹⁰ "Lament," "Salvation oracles."¹¹

The Role of Prophets

The prophets look back to the law/covenants at least as much as they look forward to the future.

They're sometimes referred to by biblical scholars as "covenant enforcers" (think of them like compliance officers that show up when God's people are showing a disregard for the Law).

*"Moses was the definitive prophet through whom God revealed His law at Sinai, and all future generations were to live in light of that covenant. If they wished to remain in the land and enjoy God's blessing there, they had to obey his law. If they didn't they would face his judgement and would ultimately be exiled from the land. The role of the prophets who succeeded Moses was to enforce the covenant, urging the people to obey it and reminding them of the blessings that followed obedience and the curses that followed disobedience."*¹²

*"[T]he prophets did not invent the blessings or curses they announced. They may have worded these blessings and curses in novel, captivating ways, as they were inspired to do so. But they were reproducing God's words not their own. Through them God announced his intention to enforce the covenant, for benefit or for harm – depending on the faithfulness of Israel – but always on the basis of and in accordance with the categories of blessing and cursing already contained in Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 4; and Deuteronomy 28-32. If you take the time to learn those chapters from the Pentateuch, you will be rewarded with a much better understanding of why the prophets said the things that they did."*¹³

⁶ Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all it's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003): 181.

⁷ Fee & Stuart, 182.

⁸ Fee & Stuart, 182.

Fee & Stuart, 190.

¹⁰ Fee & Stuart, 194-197.

¹¹ Andreas Kostenberger & Richard Patterson, *Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011): 324-328.

¹² Vaughan Roberts, *God's Big Picture* (Nottingham: IVP, 2002): 94.

¹³ Fee & Stuart, 184-185.

Most of the prophetic messages rebuke Israel/Judah for their transgressions. Indictment is followed by a warning of coming judgement. Prophets give God's people an ultimatum between repentance and continued rebellion. The people's response determines whether God follows through with judgement or mitigates it with mercy.

Prophets don't just do Law and Judgement. Part of reminding the people what God is like and of the covenants He has made with them, involves giving them hope of future deliverance. Thus, many of the prophetic Scriptures convey a vision of what God will bring about after judgement.

Some prophecies of the future have already been fulfilled (from our historical perspective), while some may be awaiting (further) fulfilment. "The prophets did indeed announce the future. But it was usually the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and other nations surrounding them that they announced rather than *our* future."¹⁴ Many of the most important foretelling prophecies point forward to the coming of the Messiah and have been fulfilled in Jesus. "... *the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*. (Rev 19:10b ESV).

Key questions to ask when reading the prophets

CONTEXT

Who is being addressed?

(e.g. Israel? Judah? Other nations? An individual?)

Where does this prophecy fit in the timeline of biblical history?

(e.g. Before, during or after the Exile? This is important to understanding what's going on).

CONTENT

Why are God's people in trouble?

(E.g. What are they guilty of? How have they violated the covenant?

Which threat or enemy are the people being faced with at this time?)

What kind of judgement are they facing? What kind of hope are they offered?

INTERPRETATION

Which aspects of God's character/nature are reflected in this prophecy?

(E.g. Holiness, righteousness, wrath, mercy, covenant faithfulness)

When were the things spoken of here fulfilled? (Or **when will** they be?)

(Is there a good basis for seeing the predictive elements of this prophecy already fulfilled in Israel's history? Is this a messianic prophecy fulfilled in the first coming of Jesus Christ? Is there something about this prophecy that suggests later fulfilment?)

How does this prophecy speak to God's people today (in light of Christ's coming)?

¹⁴ Fee & Stuart, 182.

Reading Apocalyptic Literature

Some parts of the Bible are avoided by Christians because they find them boring. Apocalyptic literature has the opposite problem – people avoid reading it because it's too scary or confusing!

Daniel 7:7-11 ESV

⁷ After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. ⁸ I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things. ⁹ "As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. ¹⁰ A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. ¹¹ "I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire.

Helpful quotes:

"[A]pocalypse [is] 'a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.'"¹⁵ Among the many features of apocalyptic, [these themes] are especially prevalent:

1. This present world is evil and without hope and can be remedied only by sovereign divine intervention.
2. The issue of the ages is essentially a spiritual battle between good and evil.
3. The Lord's intervention will entail catastrophic events.
4. Following the time of God's universal judgment, a final new age of peace, prosperity, and righteousness will be ushered in.

[5.] Apocalyptic literature customarily is presented via visions of the future and contains graphic images, fantastic other-worldly settings and scenes, and an abundant use of symbols, such as the use of numbers, colours, and animals."¹⁶

"[Apocalyptic literature is] intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority."¹⁷

¹⁵ Simplified Translation: *Apocalyptic writings tell us about hidden spiritual realities which have been revealed to a human author by a heavenly messenger (e.g. an angel). The scenes and images witnessed by the author are presented to the reader in the form of narrative prose (rather like a story). References are made to time and space in these writings because there is a sense in which the apocalyptic vision relates to the end of time and is showing us another realm of reality.*

¹⁶ Kostenberger & Patterson, 328-9.

¹⁷ Kostenberger & Patterson, 520.

“Earthly situations are depicted as temporary and transitory in light of the eternal realities of the spiritual world. This heavenly perspective dramatically contrasts the worldly scenarios facing the recipients. Although some scholars downplay the eschatological nature of the visions, apocalyptic literature provides a provocative and effective vehicle for communicating end-time expectations.”¹⁸

Some guidelines for reading apocalyptic literature

This is not history and should be read *literarily* not literally [e.g. Apart from in a nightmare, you should not expect to see lion-tooth, man-faced, long-haired, scorpion locusts as depicted in Revelation 9. Likewise, a literal ten horned, seven-headed bear-clawed, lion-mouthed leopard beast is not going to come bubbling up from the Mediterranean sea!]. In fact, much of what we said about reading the metaphors and symbolism in biblical poetry would apply to apocalyptic literature. It’s kind of a fusion between prophecy, poetry and narrative: communicating divine truth to God’s people through vivid imagery and scenes which tell part of a story.

Two mistakes about apocalyptic literature and *timing* (i.e. past, present, future):

- 1) It’s nearly all about the (near) future!
- 2) It’s nearly all about the (distant) past!

“People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually, from a non-linear, non-subjective point of view it is more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly, timey-wimey...stuff.” DW.

In apocalyptic literature the lines between history and eternity can be blurred. Past, present and future may not be as concrete as we’d like them to be. That’s why there can be intense argument among Christians as to whether a particular passage is already fulfilled or awaiting fulfilment!

But we can be guided by these two principles:

- 1) the message had to be relevant to the context of its original recipients
(e.g. Revelation 9 isn’t talking about attack helicopters when it describes the locusts)
- 2) the message remains relevant to God’s people for all generations (including right now!).
(the insights into the spiritual realm and end of time still inform our lives as God’s people)

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. (Rev 1:3 ESV)

When reading, ensure to:

- “1. Acquaint yourself with the characteristics of apocalyptic literature
2. Note the setting of the passage historically and contextually
3. Distinguish carefully the use of symbols, themes, and figures of speech from their standard literal sense.
4. Determine the author's purpose in using apocalyptic features.
5. As with other types of prophecy, try to place yourself in the oral setting of those who

¹⁸ Kostenberger & Patterson, 521.



first heard the message. Use historical imagination and engage not only your mind but also your heart and affections.”¹⁹

Bible Project Video: The Prophets

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edcqUu_BtN0

#4 Law

The devil's gospel's in the details: a quick guide to law & genealogies

How to read biblical law

Reading law after law in Exodus, Leviticus or Deuteronomy can be dreary. These are the parts of the Bible that Christians would be most likely to confess that they avoid. But what is the purpose of chapter upon chapter of divine rules for living?

The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) stand at the head of the Law (often called ‘Mosaic’ after Moses or ‘Sinaitic’ after Mt Sinai where it was delivered to Israel) and are unique in terms of being the precepts inscribed by God upon tablets of stone. The Law in the following chapters and books of the Bible are mostly applications or extensions of these fundamental commandments.

But if we want to ‘categorise’ what we’re reading in the Law, Jesus’ identification of the two greatest commandments is probably the most helpful guide: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”³⁸ This is the great and first commandment³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” When considering a particular law (or set of laws) in the OT, we can ask whether they guide us in our love and service of God (e.g. laws relating to **piety** and **purity**) or love towards our neighbour (e.g. laws relating to **charity** and **equity**).

“[R]ather than reading Old Testament laws in order to decide to which category they belong [e.g. the common divisions of ‘moral’, ‘ceremonial’ and ‘civil’] or which of these laws are absolute and universally binding standards or which are ethically and historically limited to Israel, the careful interpreter should see them as part of the broad narrative in which they are found...”

All the laws are to be treated as the expression of the will and high moral standards of a sovereign and holy God. They are designed for a redeemed people specially chosen to represent him and reflect his character in their lives.”²⁰

¹⁹ Kostenberger & Patterson, 330-331.

²⁰ Kostenberger & Patterson, 164.

I would suggest that there's little value for Christians today in randomly picking out bits of the Law to read, debate or try to apply. They are more beneficial to us as a set, pattern or system, to remind us of the characteristics of the relationship between God and His people in the Old Testament.

For instance, the law section of Exodus (following the salvation section dealing with God's rescue of Israel from Egypt), is not all about moral rules (though these are very important!). Rather, it centres around the theme of God dwelling amongst His people (which we looked at last week). The reason we get detail upon detail about the ark of the covenant, tabernacle, priestly garments and offerings is because these things are core to Israel as a society with God at the centre. When you read about the ark and tabernacle, you're reading about the expression of God's presence dwelling in the midst of His people. When you read about the priesthood and offerings, you're reading about the necessity of God's people dealing with their sin if they're to live in close proximity to a holy God. The seemingly pedantic details communicate to us that if sinners wish to have a relationship with a holy God, we need to do it on His terms.

None of the laws are arbitrary or unreasonable, because they are all designed to remind the Israelites (and us) of fundamental truths about God's holiness and our sinfulness and to convey a sense of what a privilege it is to have a covenant relationship with God. So when we reach these chapters in our Bible, we're not supposed to say, "Oh my goodness, not another 50 verses about the decorations of the tabernacle!" We're supposed to say, "Wow, the tabernacle must be really important if God spent so much time describing its exact dimensions and features!"

It also helps to consider the central themes of each different section of the Law (kind of like we did last week for the whole Bible, but on a smaller scale). I've suggested that in addition to core ethical precepts about how Israelites should live and behave in God's presence, **Exodus** is focused on what a society centred around Yahweh looks like (thus the emphasis on the tabernacle as a visual and physical centre of the nation). The structure of **Leviticus** arguably has "twin peaks" – chapter 16 (atonement) and chapter 19 (covenantal holiness). Therefore when we read the rest of the book (commonly regarded as one of the toughest slogs in Bible reading!), we can helpfully ask of other laws: "How does this relate to Israel's need for reconciliation with God through atonement?" or "How does this reinforce the need for God's people to be holy, even as He is holy?"

Deuteronomy focuses on preparing the Israelites to live as God's people in the Promised Land. The early chapters focus on reiterating the fundamental principles of the Law (e.g. Ten Commandments in ch 5; the greatest commandment in ch 6) culminating in the need for a circumcised heart (10:16). The later chapters focus on the blessings and curses related to the people's obedience to the Law (important to the rest of the biblical story!) and include the promise that God will circumcise the hearts of His people in the future (30:6). At the centre of Deuteronomy we find laws relating to the inevitable appointment of a king (17:14-20); the importance of the priesthood (18:1-8); and the promise that God will raise up a prophet like Moses for His people (18:15-23). When reading laws in Deuteronomy we can ask: "How do these laws help Israel live out their identity as God's holy people in the Promised Land?" "How do the warnings of failure and promise of redemption foreshadow the rest of the biblical story?" "How does Jesus fulfil the need for a prophet/priest/king to lead God's people in God's kingdom and to give us hearts to obey God's Word?"



Bible Project Video: Reading Biblical Law

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sew1kBle-W0>

A quick word on reading genealogies in the Bible

They're too cumbersome to read aloud at church and most people skip over them in their personal Bible reading, but genealogies are important! They remind us that – to misappropriate the tagline from *Judge Judy* – the Bible deals with real cases and real people.

For the ancient Israelites, these lists of names and family trees undoubtedly had more obvious significance than they do for us. For instance, Genesis 10 would have meant a lot more to them than to us, as these figures are the ancestors of their neighbours (and often their enemies!). These branches of people and nations descended from Noah after the Great Flood allow the Israelites to see their place in the ancient world, in relation to the other nations that lived around them.

When we get to the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles there are countless names given, from the dawn of humanity to the Jewish return from Babylon. We might be inclined to see these lists as an ancient registry of births, deaths and marriages that doesn't have much use in modern times, other than perhaps as a sourcebook for picking out a really cool and unique Hebrew baby name. But that isn't why they are where they are in our Bibles.

"For ancient Israelite readers, these genealogies weren't just a matter of family lines but a shorthand way of retelling the stories of all these characters in an annotated form. These names would have provoked whole memories of earlier scriptural stories. The genealogies were meant to activate all kinds of mental links and collective stories deeply ingrained in Hebrew culture. After reading through the genealogies, readers come to the very brief story of Saul's reign and failure as a king (1 Chron. 10), and then we quickly move on to King David (1 Chron. 11-29), which retells the stories from 2 Samuel. You might even come to appreciate these genealogies. They are the introduction to a retelling of Israel's entire story, focusing on the future hope of a messianic king like David, who will restore the temple and God's kingdom over the nations."²¹

So it's probably best to attempt a reading of 1 Chronicles after being familiar with the "story-so-far" in the OT. The genealogies will then serve as a series of brief, memory-jolts that replay key parts of the story. They set us up for the more detailed narrative of events that the Chronicler wants to focus upon as he tells the story of God's people through David's family: from his crowning to the exile of his descendants in Babylon. Apart from recognising the most famous biblical figures when they appear and remembering their stories, it's also worth paying attention to the verses where the Chronicler provides a short reference to additional information that is significant for remembering the "story-so-far" (e.g. 1:10, 1:19, 1:27, 2:3, 2:7, 3:4, 4:9-10, 5:1-2, 5:18-22, 5:25-26, 6:15, 6:49).

The genealogies in Ezra are important because they demonstrate that the people returning from exile in Babylon were the descendants of people who had previously lived in Judea. It highlights the continuity

²¹ <https://thebibleproject.com/blog/chronicles-not-just-repeat/> ¶4.

between the Jewish kingdom before the exile and the nation of returnees. It also highlights God's faithfulness to His word in bringing the people back as He'd promised.

Finally, the genealogies of Jesus (Matthew 1; Luke 3) are important because they situate the coming of Christ in the broader narrative of God's people. They highlight His descent from Abraham, David and Zerubbabel as key figures in the biblical story prior to the Gospels. It's also interesting to look up the women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus – all remarkable ladies in the biblical story!

#5 Gospels

"The four Gospels tell the same basic story: Jesus ministers in several regions of Israel, teaching and performing miracles; he gathers followers and makes enemies (especially in the Jewish religious establishment); this opposition leads to his death by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans in Jerusalem; he is resurrected from the grave. All four accounts relate that Jesus' followers recognized him to be God's Messiah, the one through whom God's plan of salvation was reaching its climax."²²

Key Ideas when Reading Gospels:

Mixed Genre

At their core, the gospels are ancient biography. They are about the life, teaching, death and resurrection of the man Jesus Christ. They are masterfully composed and, while different to modern biography in the detail that is included, they each paint beautiful complementary portraits of their subject. Quickly we discover the key characters and focus of their writing: Jesus and God.

Much of the gospels then are narrative, but interspersed as sections of teaching, or conversations Jesus has with various types of people.

Historical, yet not always chronological

Some people get hung up on the fact that the gospels can seem to contradict each other when it comes to the timeline of Jesus' life. Although they are very much historical documents, they often arrange themselves thematically rather than chronologically. Different gospel authors arrange the events differently for their own emphasis. For example, Mark 2:1-3:6 reports five controversies in a row that Matthew spreads out over chapters 8-12.²³ In the mind of the authors, it is clear that chronology is less significant than issues of purpose and meaning.

Four Perspectives

Remember, each of the four gospels was written by a different person (therefore with different personal experiences and personality) for different immediate audience (therefore different religious and cultural

²² Moo, D. J. (2015). [Introduction to the New Testament](#). In D. A. Carson (Ed.), *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message* (pp. 1910–1911). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

²³ ESV Study Bible, 1811.

context). This means the four gospels have different flavours. While all true, they each present the truth differently.

Matthew Mark and Luke are called the synoptic gospels (meaning *seen together*), because they overlap in many places and they tell the story of Jesus from “below”. They begin with the birth of Jesus or his genealogy and then develop this picture of Jesus as the Son of God through the gospel. On the other hand, the Gospel of John tells the story from “above”, starting with heavens point of view and God the Son entering into the world – *the Word made flesh* (John 1:14). These angles aren’t in conflict concerning who Jesus is, they just show him from a different perspective.

“The diversity in our Gospels can prove challenging at times, but a careful and charitable reading reveals that they do not contradict one another. Rather, they complement one another: God has used four different early Christian leaders to help his people understand the many facets of Jesus’ life and teaching.”²⁴

Cross Narrative is Central

About one third of all the gospels is spent telling the cross narrative. That does mean that two-thirds of the content written about Jesus tells us of his birth, his teaching, his public ministry and his miracles, covering about a 3-year span. But then the pace slows right down, and the rest covers just a few days – the *crux* of the story. Don’t miss the importance of this. WE can’t understand the man if we don’t understand the significance of his death – that Jesus came *to die for sinners*. The gospel writers don’t want us to miss this! IS just still just a curious travelling preacher in your mind? Or have you come to see him for who he really is, God in flesh come to save the world.

Example of Gospel

Take the example below of John. Read through the story with an eye on the following questions:

- Where is Jesus? To whom is he speaking? Who are the characters? What information does the author give about them that may be significant to interpreting the story?
- What is the setting? How might that factor in or colour my reading?
- What is Jesus talking about? Why? What is he addressing?

On top of these details that fall out of a careful reading of the text itself, are the standard questions concerning context that you must always ask:

- *Literary Context*: What has just come before this that might influence my interpretation of this narrative? Is this part of a greater whole?
- *Historical Context*: What is going on in this point of history? What are the cultural, historical, economic, geographical, moral and social influences at play here?
- *Canonical Context*: Where does this fit canonically? Where does this fit in the big story?

²⁴ Moo, D. J. (2015). [Introduction to the New Testament](#). In D. A. Carson (Ed.), *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message* (pp. 1910–1911). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Example Text:

John 10 | I Am the Good Shepherd

10 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.² But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹ I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

¹⁹ There was again a division among the Jews because of these words. ²⁰ Many of them said, “He has a demon, and is insane; why listen to him?” ²¹ Others said, “These are not the words of one who is oppressed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

I and the Father Are One

²² At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. ²⁴ So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.” ²⁵ Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one.”

³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. ³² Jesus answered them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?” ³³ The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.” ³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said,

you are gods’? ³⁵ If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken—³⁶ do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? ³⁷ If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; ³⁸ but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” ³⁹ Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

⁴⁰ He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained. ⁴¹ And many came to him. And they said, “John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true.” ⁴² And many believed in him there.

#6 Epistles

Key Ideas when Reading the Epistles:

Making Sense of Life with Jesus

The epistles are written on this side of the cross of Jesus, so like us, they are looking backwards in time and speaking of his significance. They are making sense of life and God now that he has come and revealed to us the fullness of God’s plan. As most of the writers are Jews, they are particularly concerned with seeing Jesus as the awaited Messiah and the fulfillment of the promises God has made to Israel.

“Written over the course of about 50 years to churches and individuals scattered all over the Mediterranean world, these letters deal with an incredible number of issues. Yet they are united in their concern to help believers understand how Jesus Christ must be the center and touchstone of all that believers think and do. Believers today read them with profit, not only to understand the many facets of Christian truth and to know how to live out the gospel in specific circumstances but also to appreciate how the gospel must be integrated into every aspect of the believer’s life.”²⁵

Context, context, context!

In particular, context governs the reading of the epistles perhaps more than anything of the other types of literature in the Bible because they are literally letters. When we read the epistles, we may as well be reading someone else’s mail. They were written by someone, to someone else (or a church) in a particular city with particular struggles, questions and concerns.

“The Epistles are not abstract philosophical or theological essays that explain the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ. In almost every instance, they are addressed to specific situations facing churches ... In interpreting the Epistles, then, we should try to understand the specific circumstances that the original readers were facing ... As readers of the Epistles today, we face a disadvantage that the first readers did not have, for they knew firsthand the situation that the letter writer addressed. Our knowledge of the

²⁵ Moo, D. J. (2015). [Introduction to the New Testament](#). In D. A. Carson (Ed.), *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message* (p. 1911). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

circumstances is partial and incomplete. Reading the letters can be like listening to half of a telephone conversation: we hear only the writer's response to the situation in a particular church. Still, we trust that God in his goodness has given us all we need to know in order to interpret the Epistles adequately and to apply them faithfully."²⁶

Major Themes

"Among the major themes in the Epistles are the following: (1) Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises in redemptive history. He is Messiah, Lord, the Son of God, and the true revelation of God. (2) The new life of believers is a gift of God, anchored in the cross and empowered by the Holy Spirit. (3) Christians experience salvation by faith, and faith expresses itself in a transformed life. The Epistles spend considerable space elaborating on believers' newness of life. (4) Believers belong to the restored Israel, the church of Jesus Christ, which must live out her calling as God's people in a sinful world. (5) In this present evil age believers suffer affliction and persecution, but they look forward with joy to the coming of Jesus Christ and the consummation of their salvation. (6) False teachers dangerously subvert the true gospel of Christ."²⁷

God Speaking to Us

"Whatever the particular issue a NT letter deals with, the way in which the author responds to it has much to teach us. We learn not only from the specific instructions the letter writers give but also from the general principles they constantly bring to bear on each issue they confront. Again and again the NT letter writers remind us of the all-encompassing importance of the lordship of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. The believer's every thought and action must be subjected to Christ, who as Lord wants to reign over every facet of the believer's life. And it is the Holy Spirit who both empowers and guides this radically Christ-centered new life. When the NT letter writers call on believers to think and act in accord with the person of Christ, they expect believers to respond because God has sent his Spirit into the hearts of his people, producing from within the attitudes and perspectives that will enable them to obey. As "occasional" letters, we must read each NT letter against the background of its particular setting, asking: when was it written? for whom? why? in what circumstances? But at the same time, God himself speaks to us in and through these occasional letters. As canonical Scripture, these letters ultimately address the church of every age and of every place."²⁸

Example of an Epistle

Take the example below of 1 Peter. Read through the letter with an eye on the following questions:

- Who is writing to who?
- What appears to be his purpose?
- What's his main point?

²⁶ ESV Study Bible, 2148.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Moo, D. J. (2015). [The Letters and Revelation](#). In D. A. Carson (Ed.), *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message* (p. 2286). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.



On top of these details that fall out of a careful reading of the text itself, are the standard questions concerning context that you must always ask:

- *Literary Context*: What has just come before this that might influence my interpretation of this narrative? Is this part of a greater whole?
- *Historical Context*: What is going on in this point of history? What are the cultural, historical, economic, geographical, moral and social influences at play here?
- *Canonical Context*: Where does this fit canonically? Where does this fit in the big story?

Example Text:

1 Peter 1

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

Born Again to a Living Hope

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹ inquiring what person or time^[a] the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Called to Be Holy

¹³ Therefore, preparing your minds for action,^[b] and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." ¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct



yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ¹⁸ knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰ He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you ²¹ who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

²² Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; ²⁴ for

“All flesh is like grass

and all its glory like the flower of grass.

The grass withers,

and the flower falls,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

Big Takeaway: How does this change how I read the Bible?

Each week, we will conclude with this question: how does this change the way I read the Bible for myself?

Homework

There will be two levels of homework each week, depending on how much time you'd like to dedicate. Level 1 is for everyone to do, but if you want to dive a bit deeper, I'd definitely encourage you to do level 2 as well.

Level #1

- Ephesians 4 to 6

Level #2

The rest of the Bible?