

**Feeding Yourself From the Word of God:
Workshop#5: Different Types of Biblical Literature (D. Parlett)**

Welcome to Workshop #5:

I was once given this wise observation about the Bible: "This Book will keep you from sin and sin will keep you from this Book". Note some of the ways our enemy, the devil, may seek to keep us "from the Book" or not effective in applying it: Being too busy; being too tired; being disorganized; being hearers of the Word and not doers (James 1:22-25); being satisfied with analysis rather than application; not finishing a section of study (and always starting new ones). Listen, deep down we should be doing Bible Study because we love God and we want to experience Him more deeply. Maintain your first love for God and Bible Study will not be a discipline but a pleasure.

Review:

What can outlining help both personally and publicly to apply scripture?

Can you remember the four foundational rules of Hermeneutics?

In this workshop, we will cover:

Handling Different Types of Literature in the Bible

Introduction

The wonderful thing about normal language is that it is not dry and precise. Every day we use colorful and creative ways to express ideas: "You must be pulling my leg"; "That rookie is so green"; "That guy is a total hottie"; "I'm under the weather today"; "Gimmie a break!"; "That argument doesn't hold water" and many more. Now, we know what these mean but imagine you were a foreigner who took all these phrases literally. You'd be very confused. Well, the Bible was written in normal language and not only has many figures of speech (like the above) but also expresses God's truth in different types of literature such as poetry, stories, proverbs, parables, prophecy and more. So, in this workshop, we will look at how we can handle these different types of literature so that we can get at the truths that may be hiding under layers of figurative or creative speech.

In a moment we will review how to handle different types of literature in the Bible. However, as I have been preparing these notes I have noted that no matter what the genre, whether poetry or teaching, I am basically applying similar principles to each, namely the Foundational Rules of Hermeneutics which we reviewed in the last lesson. So, techniques like understanding the historical / grammatical context and letting Scripture interpret Scripture apply no matter what genre you are dealing with. With that in mind I will give some general principles for interpreting any genre but then give specific hints or tips that apply uniquely to the different types of literature you find in the Word.

A. Basic Principles for all Genres of Literature

Try to find out the reason or purpose the author has for writing this.

Lessons you draw out should be in line with this purpose. Now, finding this out is not always easy. Sometimes the purpose of a book is stated clearly somewhere in the book but other times we have to figure it out from what is written. Again, a good Study Bible usually has a short summary of what some leading scholars think this purpose is and that can be very helpful.

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For example: John clearly states in John 20:31 that his purpose in writing is so “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name”. So, we should be looking at the narrative to learn more about who Jesus really is and what he is like. On the other hand the theme of Daniel is not explicitly stated. However, my Study Bible says that the purpose was to show God’s sovereignty. So, as I read and interpret Daniel I should ask, “What can I learn about God’s sovereignty and what difference does that make?”

Make sure your interpretation does not contradict other parts of Scripture.

When I read about the life of Jacob I see that he often lied and manipulated others even though it was seemingly for the purpose of achieving the promises of God in his life. Obviously we are not supposed to imitate this example of achieving God’s will. (See rules for Narrative sections). Obviously, it’s not O.K. to lie even if it’s for a good or heavenly cause (like some cults teach). This clearly violates other commandments on truth telling. Proverbs 12:22 for example, “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful.” So check your lessons with other parts of Scripture. Capiche?

Find a principle that stands the test of time.

Some lessons are set in a certain time and place. Circumstances change and the lessons may not apply anymore. For example, in the Gospel of John (10:1-11) Jesus gives some instructions to the disciples about how to proclaim the Kingdom of God. It says: Don’t greet people on the road but do enter a house with a particular greeting and enjoy the hospitality in the first house that accepts you. What’s up with that? Here, an understanding of the customs and culture of that time would be helpful. If we were to draw principles from this they would have to have meaning for us now. We do not have many of the same hospitality customs as in those days. So we have to think carefully about how the underlying principles would be applied today. What do you think those are for this passage?

B.Types of Literature in the Bible (and How to Handle them)

Didactic / Teaching Sections:

Didactic is a very superior sort of word and you should use it to impress your friends with your profound knowledge of Biblical interpretation. Unfortunately it’s just a fancy word for teaching or explaining. So, generally speaking, the didactic sections are those parts of the Bible that teach or explain Christian truths. Duh! They are commonly found in the letters of Paul, John, Peter and others, but much of the Gospels contain teaching sections also. Because they are teaching sections, the authors are making great efforts to clearly explain and illuminate things. This makes them some of the easiest sections to interpret with applicable principles easily drawn out. As you carefully apply the foundational principles of interpretation you should have a great time.

Probably the only challenge of the teaching sections are that they were, in fact, originally letters written to individuals or groups who had often initiated particular issues or questions to the authors. (Or news had reached the author concerning the recipients’ condition). Sometimes we don’t really know the situations and challenges the recipients of those letters were experiencing but we can sometimes get clues from other parts of the Bible or by inferring them from the answers, kind of like Jeopardy. So, as has been emphasized already, it’s important to know the context and intent of these letters.

Laws:

Many laws or commandments are given in the Bible. A key distinction would be whether those laws were for that time and situation or whether they are for all times and situations (universal) and therefore still applicable to us.

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Narrative:

Narratives are stories. However, this does not imply they are not true. Rather they should be considered to be accurate but selective accounts of important people and events in Biblical history. Much of the Bible is narrative. It's often fun and would make great movie scripts. The first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah to the Jews, are narrative (but because of some lengthy sections in the middle there where Moses receives the rules by which the nation of Israel was to live, this section is also known as the *Law*). The next twelve books are also narrative and because of their historical nature are often called *History*. The four Gospels and the book of Acts are the main narrative sections of the New Testament.

Keep in mind that the narratives are stories of real people who experienced both mistakes and successes. In other words, sometimes they were good examples to us and sometimes they were bad examples. Here is the main rule-of-thumb for making application points from narrative sections: Discern where they did well and what timeless Biblical principles they were exercising; and where they did not do so well and try to recognize what attitudes contributed to their mistakes and learn from that. Even Jesus is not to be imitated to the smallest detail, is he? After all, your purpose in life is not to die on the cross for the sins of the whole world, is it? Perhaps some of these points are obvious but many before have come up with crazy rules and doctrines based on narratives alone. A good guideline is to see where the narratives and the teaching sections match up. Then you can be confident of what you are imitating.

Parables:

Jesus liked using parables. They are short, imaginative, power-packed stories that have an important message or teaching. Clearly, it would have been clearer if Jesus had stated things plainly, analytically, but a colorful story is memorable and relates to people, objects or situations that the people of that time (and even today) can understand. But Jesus also indicated that the purpose of a parable was to both reveal truth to certain people and hide it from others (Mark 4:10-12). The difference seems to depend on the spiritual condition of the heart. Fun, yeah?

Well, parables can be fun and memorable but also tricky. Here's why: Parables are stories with details. Are the details important or just the main point of the story? Historically there's been some debate. However, in general, it's safer to just assume the main point was intended but the few times that Jesus interprets his own parables we see him also apply meaning to certain details (such as in the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13). So the safe approach is to emphasize the main point and read into the details as they relate or support the main point. Any speculation beyond this is not helpful.

Parables are found in all four of the Gospels but especially in Luke.

Hebrew Poetry:

Everyone likes poetry, don't they? Anyway, poetry has a way of making ordinary thoughts and feelings seem special. Many cultures have developed various forms of poetry and some even have a poetic way of talking all the time. Most of the Bible was written by such people.

Most of the poetic passages in the Bible are Hebrew poetry and are found in the Old Testament although you can see this Hebrew way of expressing things throughout the whole Bible. There are several different kinds of poetic literature such as psalms, (which are song lyrics), proverbs, (which are pithy nuggets of wisdom), and then some that are hard to categorize such as Job, (a figurative story?), Ecclesiastes, (a philosophical discussion) and even Song of Songs (which could be a pretty sexy dialogue, depending on how you interpret it).

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Throughout these sections and many other places in Scripture we find examples of Hebrew poetry. But here's a good rule of thumb when you run across it: The more poetic it is the less dogmatic you should be. Because of the more figurative nature of poetic language we need to be careful about developing doctrines from it. Still, the poetic sections can be a rich and valuable source of encouragement for us.

In Hebrew Poetry they weren't into rhyming sounds, like I like to do. Instead, it is distinguished by the rhyming of thoughts. It typically starts with a short thought, which is immediately followed by another thought that either emphasizes, expands or even contrasts with the first thought. This is known as parallelism. Here are some examples from the fun book of Proverbs:

Like a gold ring in a pig's snout
is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion. (Prov. 11:22)

A good name is more desirable than great riches;
to be esteemed is better than silver of gold. (Prov. 22:1)

A gentle answer turns away wrath
but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Prov. 15:1)

You also find this type of parallel communication in many other places including the teachings of Jesus. You see, God is so smart that He can communicate through any culture or language He wants to. As a result, we have much of the Bible in the fun, colorful and beautiful Hebrew language.

By the way, we should not consider the statements of proverbs to always be true in every conceivable time, place or situation. Rather we should consider them to be generally true. For example, look at Proverbs 23:9 and 26:5. Do these contradict? What this shows is that there might be times when one applies and times when the other applies. Both can be generally true depending on the situation.

Prophecy:

This is probably the most difficult genre to interpret. Prophecy is generally God making known some kind of secret knowledge through the prophet. The most common example would be the prediction of future events. These predictions might come true tens, hundreds or even thousands of years in the future. Whether we are looking back at prophecies that have come true or looking forward to ones that will come true we are encouraged that God is in control of all things.

However, prophetic passages can also make predictions or talk about secret knowledge about present or near-present situations such as Paul's declaration to Elymas in Acts Ch. 13, "You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." And immediately he was!

And prophecy can be a word of knowledge to judge, warn, instruct or encourage people. Note Paul's good guidelines for the use of prophecy in the body of believers in 1 Corinthians 14. (Whether this kind of prophecy is legitimately practiced today is a matter of debate).

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Prophecy is difficult to interpret because it often uses symbolic language that is not easy to figure out. Revelation 17 describes “a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.” What’s up with that? Because of this lack of precision prophecy is often open to a wide variety of interpretations. Further, sometimes it seems as though a prediction has several fulfillments at different times in history (such as the first and second coming of Christ).

In light of this, my advice for those inexperienced at handling this genre is... to get advice. Read a book on this topic, perhaps. It can be helpful to study fulfilled prophecy, especially the Old Testament predictions about Jesus Christ but trying to explain or predict prophecy that is yet unfulfilled, such as the second coming of Christ or the End Times, is difficult and even dangerous. If you can commit to a serious study of prophecy and the difficulties and issues surrounding its interpretation then by all means dive in. But be careful, eh?

The Old Testament divides its prophecy sections into major prophets and minor prophets. This distinction is not based on relative importance but rather on wordiness! The long-winded ones are Isaiah, Jeremiah, (his book Lamentations), Ezekiel, and Daniel. Those of the more laconic variety are the next twelve names in your Bible’s table of contents, such as Jonah or famous Amos.

C. Literature Review

Let’s put together some of the hints in the above section to get a picture of the whole Bible and what kinds of literature are found generally in each passage. Keep in mind that many books contain several kinds mixed together. So, we are looking for the general indication for each.

Old Testament

Book	Genre	Summary
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	Narrative	The Law
Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Narrative	History of the Jewish people
Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	Poetry	Poetry: prose, song lyrics, wisdom, philosophy, love dialog
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel	Prophecy	Major Prophets
Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi	Prophecy	Minor Prophets

New Testament

Book	Genre	Summary
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts	Narrative	Life of Jesus and early disciples
Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude	Teaching	Letters to the early church
Revelation	Prophecy	Revelation

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D. Goals for this workshop:

1. Share some of the insights that have blessed you with the group, or with a friend.
2. Have you had a verse where you had to apply some of the foundational rules of Hermeneutics? If so, share that with the group, or with a friend.
3. I highly encourage you to try your hand at the suggested Interpretation excises in today's lesson.

E. Next Workshop:

Applying the Word of God

F. Workshop #5: Questions / Exercises:

1. Try interpreting the verses below. Most of them involve interpreting various figures of speech and they are selected from various genres of literature found in the Bible. I think you'll have fun with them.

2 Corinthians 5:1-4: Do we become buildings when we go to heaven? Make sure we understand the meaning of "tent", "heavenly dwelling", and "naked".

Hosea 6:4-6 and Hosea 14:4-6: What is the meaning of dew in each of these verses? Is there a problem here? What qualities of dew are used in each case?

Matthew 17:20-21: Does Mark 4:30-32 help? What does "mustard seed" represent? What does it say about faith? In the Mark verse, what does Jesus mean when he says, "...a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground."? Does it bother you that mustard seeds are not actually the smallest seeds? Do you think he was stating a botanical truth here or did he have another intent with this word picture?

I Peter 2:2: What is pure spiritual milk? Explain the meaning.

Exodus 21:17: What do you think of this law? What does it mean? Do you think it is harsh? This is a law of God. Does it apply today? Why or why not? In the Ten Commandments, Commandment number four tells us to remember the Sabbath and to not do any work. Do you think this commandment applies today? (What about the other ones)? If it does, what does it mean for us? For the Jews, the Sabbath was on Saturday but early Christians (until today) began meeting on Sundays because that's when Jesus was raised from the dead. If we keep the Sabbath, is it important which day we do it? What does it mean to keep the Sabbath?

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Matthew 6:11: What is daily bread?

Psalms 98:8: How can a river clap its hands? What does that mean? How does knowing the type of literature help here?

Matthew 18:21-22: Can we not forgive the 491st time? What does this number mean?

Revelation 5:7-8: Do our prayers end up as smoke? What does this mean? How does this affect our prayer life?

Luke 18:18-25 (A Parable): What is the eye of the needle? Is it impossible for a rich man to go to heaven?

Proverbs 16:11: What is this verse talking about? What would it mean for us today?

Acts 4:36: What does son of Encouragement mean? Did encouragement have a child? What is this saying about Barnabas? What does your name mean? Do you think the meaning of a name has more importance in different or past cultures? Read Colossians 3:17. What does it mean to do it all in “the name of the Lord Jesus”? What does it mean when people end their prayers with, “We pray in Jesus name. Amen”?

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Genesis 1-3: The Genesis account of Creation and the fall of Mankind. Do you take this account literally? If not, how do you take it? Is it poetic? Does it still hold an accurate picture of what happened? What is your position on Creation, Adam and Eve?

G. Key steps so far:

1. Choose a section to study.
2. Learn about the Background of the book you are studying.
3. Observation: Try different techniques to become familiar with a part or all of your section.
4. Interpretation: Usually the meaning is pretty clear. If not, then we bring in the rules of Hermeneutics to help.
5. Handling different types of literature: Are there figures of speech or poetic language you need to interpret in your passage?