

GETTING INTO THE WORD – APPROACHING THE BIBLE

TOOL: APPROACHING THE BIBLE

Understanding how to approach the Bible is helpful for people to better understand the words God is speaking through the pages of Scripture. There are fundamentals that can help us understand context and writing styles that should shape how we read various books of the Bible.

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS!

By understanding the Bible as a Holy Spirit-breathed library, you will be able to better understand what God intended to speak through the text and how those principles are applicable to you today. Once you understand these fundamentals, think through them as you approach Scripture. As you do, you will learn new insights and find out more about God's heart for humanity and His character will become even more clear.

Three Fundamentals for Approaching the Bible:

1. Understand that the Bible is not a single book, but a library.

The Bible is a collection of 66 books written over the span of 1500 years by an estimated count of 40 authors. It contains writing and literature from multiple authors to multiple audiences that include various cultural contexts and locations. However, the compilation of the Bible all points to ONE message about ONE man – Jesus!

There are various genres in the Bible, and knowing the types should inform the way we read it. For example, in the Bible, we see the following literary features across the various books:

- Historical Narrative: Describes events in a chronological and factual manner.
 - *Example: Exodus*
- Law (Torah): Provides legal codes and instructions.
 - *Example: Leviticus*
- Poetry: Uses artistic and rhythmic language to express emotions and ideas.
 - *Example: Psalms*
- Prophecy: Conveys messages about God's plans and future events.
 - *Example: Isaiah*
- Wisdom Literature: Explores questions of ethics, human behavior, and God's order.
 - *Example: Proverbs*

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- Apocalyptic Literature: Uses vivid imagery and symbolism to convey messages about judgement and the end times.
 - *Example: Daniel, Revelation*
- Gospel (Biography): Presents biographical accounts of Jesus' life, from diverse perspectives and angles.
 - *Example: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John*
- Epistles (Letters): Contains letters addressing specific early Christian communities, individuals, and problems.
 - *Example: Paul's letters – 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Ephesians, etc.*
- Parables: Uses short, often fictional stories to illustrate moral or spiritual lessons that are highly symbolic or metaphorical.
 - *Example: Jesus' teachings in the Gospels*

What we can learn from this – the Bible is always to be taken seriously, but depending on the literary genre, it may not always be intended to be taken literally. Because the Bible is a great piece of literature, we need to read it as the literature intended by the author (which is ultimately God through humans).

2. Understand that the Bible wasn't written to "me".

Hear us out on this one – yes, the Bible is alive and active so it's *always speaking to us* and is *absolutely purposed for us*, but it actually *wasn't written to us*. What we mean is this – the Bible was written to a specific audience, at specific times, and in specific cultures that are far removed from our Westernized post-modern 21st century culture of today.

The danger of taking verses out of context and trying to apply it to ourselves, without actually understanding the original application of the verse at the time it was written, is that we can be misled. If we divorce verses from their original context, audience, and culture, we can read into the Bible what we want it to say instead of what it is actually saying. The author (again, ultimately God through various humans), wrote with these things in mind, so it's important we ask ourselves as we read, "what was the original author attempting to communicate to his original audience?"

We need to approach the text with humility to understand that the Bible is not all about us, but rather it's all about HIM. The Bible is about God's history, His character, and His desires. The wisdom and principles in the Bible, however, do transcend time, culture, locations, and people groups. If we allow the text to speak for itself, then we can be sure that we aren't speaking for the text.

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Here are some helpful questions to ask when approaching a passage in the Bible:

- Who was it written to and what was the author attempting to communicate to them?
- Is the passage *descriptive* or *prescriptive*? In other words, is the Bible describing particular situations, cultural practices, or occurrences in history, or is it actually prescribing believers a certain way of living or providing a moral guidance for us to carry out today?
- How do these words/themes apply to me, individually, or to us as a group today? We should take principles from the text to see how they may affect us today – both individually and as a society, community, or culture.

3. Understand there is historical and cultural background.

What is often confusing can become clarified if we apply the appropriate context to scripture. For many texts in the Bible that don't make sense to us upon initial consumption, there were likely cultural understandings and context that would have been picked up by the original audience.

For example, the historical and cultural background is incredibly helpful in understanding some of the laws described in Exodus and Leviticus. As you understand more of the background, it actually highlights even more of the goodness and character of God. These laws often appear very strange but when they were written, God was meeting them in their unique background to address things that would have made sense to where they were culturally.

- Example: "*Do not boil a young goat in its mother's milk*" found in Exodus 23:19 Exodus 34:26, and Deuteronomy 14:21
 - Cultural context: While the reason for this rule is not made explicit in these texts, there was a Canaanite ritual at the time in which a baby goat was boiled in its mother's milk as a sacrifice to a pagan god to bring fertility and increase. There is also another applicable principle God is teaching us here regarding what He has given for life and nourishment should not be used to cause death and destruction.

Scripture contains many assumed and unspoken historical, social, economic, political, and religious contexts. The original audience would have known all of these contexts because they were living in them – the Bible's authors didn't need to spell them out. However, as we are centuries removed, we won't know those contexts without biblical scholars, teachers, and historians helping to fill in the gaps. And, sometimes, those contexts can also be pivotal in understanding or enriching a passage. However, we can be confident that there is always transcending relevance and purpose for us today in what was written so many years ago.