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Doctrine of Scripture, Lesson 5

Understanding the Bible

Last week, we talked about how God's word is revealed to us in the Bible, and how the Bible came to be: through God *inspiring* specific men to write His inerrant, authoritative Word. We talked about how that means that in order to understand God's Word, we have to understand the actual words of the Bible, as they were originally written.

Now, for starters, those words were written in Hebrew and Greek (which most of us probably can't read); but, thankfully, we have many good English translations today, which we talked about last time.

But the work of studying and interpreting God's Word remains. We still have to work to figure out what the Bible means (which can sometimes be much easier said than done). So, how do we study the Bible? Well, this could be a much larger topic, but today, I just want to give us some general guidelines for where to begin; we'll put a lot of this into practice in our next Sunday School class, which we'll begin when we come back after our Winter break (Jan. 9th).

First, let's go over our goal in studying the Bible:

I. Understanding the Words: Interpreting the Authors' Intended Meaning

- In order to understand and interpret the Bible, we must understand and interpret the author's *intended meaning*.

A. The actual words written in the Bible are God's Word

B. Therefore, in order to understand God's Word, we must understand the the written words

C. Every part of scripture has two authors:

1. The divine author: God
2. The human author of each given book/passage

D. We must understand God's intended meaning by understanding the human author's intended meaning

- God is the author of the whole Bible. We've seen this over and over again throughout our study of what the Bible says about itself over the last several weeks: the Bible is God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. God wrote the Bible.

- But, as we saw last week, God wrote the Bible *through human authors*. God inspired authors to write exactly what he wanted them to write, in various times, places, languages, and canonical contexts.
- Furthermore, as we saw last week, God's divine inspiration of the human authors *doesn't mean* that they simply wrote down what God dictated. Now, to be sure, this is *certainly* how parts of the Bible were written. (For example, many of the prophets repeat what God dictates when they use the introductory formula, "Thus says the LORD.") But many other parts, like the recording of history, the writing of poems and Psalms and Proverbs, or even the New Testament letters, were written by human beings coming up with their own words, in their own way, saying what they wanted to say to particular audiences, using their own personality, experiences, language, style, contexts, etc. Yet they did so *under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit*, so that they only wrote down what God wanted them to write.
- This means that God expresses his intended meaning of the text *through the human author's intended meaning of any given Biblical text*.
- To understand what God says, we have to understand what the human authors said (and intentionally meant to say) in the Bible.
- So, how do we do that? We have to *bridge the gap*.

II. Understanding the Context: Bridging the Gap

- To understand and interpret the Bible, we have to understand the biblical authors' intended meaning of every given book and passage of the Bible - even how the whole Bible fits together.
- But this has its difficulties - we're removed from the biblical authors by thousands of years! We live in a very different time, place, and historical-cultural context than they did. We speak different languages, have very different worldviews, and do not have the same shared experiences and understandings of things like the meaning of specific words, cultural expressions and idioms, current events and politics, geography, or even views of poetry and literary genres.

- There is a *gap* between us today and the original human author and audiences for every book of the Bible that we read (in fact, even the different books of the Bible have very different contexts, authors, and audiences from each other!) This large difference of context leaves a “gap” of understanding between us - like the gap of a canyon cut by a river; we need a *bridge* to be built in order to cross it.
- Because of this, our job as readers and interpreters is to *bridge the gap* in order to understand, as best as possible, what the Bible means, as originally intended by the authors (both the human author, and the divine author of it all, God).

A. Historical Context - Historical/Cultural background of passage?

- First off, we need to recognize the historical gap between us. The Bible was written over hundreds of years. The New Testament was written 2,000 years ago. The Old Testament was written hundreds of years before that, over many centuries.
- This means the first gap to be crossed is that of historical and cultural differences.
- Now, this includes a big difference in *language* - as we discussed last week, the Bible was written in ancient Hebrew and Koine Greek, mainly, and a little bit in Aramaic. This is why we need good translations and to understand how translations work (which we discussed at length last week).
- But this also means we need to understand the different historical contexts that each book of the Bible was written in. When reading the Bible, there will be times where we need to understand how certain things worked in different periods of history, or how different countries and governments worked and related to each other, or even how things like money, slaves, farming practices, building practices, weather patterns, geographical features, and other features of everyday life in the ancient world would have worked. Many of these things would have been taken for granted by the original author and audience, but we might not know about them at first (like how we would understand what a car is and wouldn't explain it, even though someone two centuries ago would have no idea what we're talking about). Furthermore, things change over time (like the word “telephone” meant something a little different 50 years ago than it does today).

- So understanding the historical context can be helpful at times, but we want to be careful not to go overboard. The point *isn't* to reconstruct the historical events *behind* the words of the Bible - instead, the point is to accurately understand *the words themselves*.
- Understanding more about the historical-cultural background of a Bible passage is only helpful to the degree that it *helps us better understand the author's intended meaning in a given passage*.
- Our goal is to understand God's Word, what He reveals to us. And this isn't something separate from, or behind, the original words of the Bible - they are the same thing. To know God's Word, we have to understand the human words of the Bible.

B. Literary context - How does it relate to the other words around it?

- Obviously, then, we have primarily focus on understanding the written words of the bible.
- When an author writes something, he/she uses specific words, grammar, styles of writing, and literary devices to craft and communicate the intended message.
- We have to read the Bible like we would read a book or a letter - we have to understand the way the words are put together, who the subjects are, what the verbs are, how it all fits together to form cohesive thoughts, logical arguments, or a flowing narrative.
- Vocabulary - meaning of the words themselves
- So we want to look at not just the individual words, but the *context* of the words.
 1. The words fit within a *sentence*.
 - Grammar - understanding the way the sentences work, and the way the words function together.
 2. The sentence fits within a *paragraph* or *passage*
 - We need to understand the way the passage or paragraph is put together, and how the sentences all fit together within it.
 - Is it a poem?
 - Is it a quote?
 - Is it making a logical argument?
 - Is it telling a story? Maybe a parable, or historical account?
 - Is it a genealogy or list of information?

- Knowing what comes before and after the sentence we're looking at helps us understand the meaning and significance of it.
- 3. The passage sits within a *book*
 - We never want to take the words, sentences, or passages out of their context. We need to understand how it all fits together within the main point of the book that it's in.
- 4. Literary Genre
 - The different genre of the book or passage helps us understand how to read and interpret it.
- 1. Historical narrative - OT history, like Genesis or 1 Samuel, or gospel accounts, like Matthew
- 2. Poetry, Songs, and Proverbs - Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes
- 3. Prophecy - Major and Minor Prophets
- 4. Letters - Most of the New Testament
- 5. Apocalypse - Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation

C. Canonical Context - How does it relate to the rest of the Bible?

- Just as each verse and passage is situated within a specific book of the Bible, so each book is situated in a particular part of the Bible's storyline.
- The Bible tells a cohesive story, with a cohesive, overarching main point: to tell us about the one, true God that we have rebelled against and how He has accomplished a plan of redemption. This plan of redemption progressively plays out over the pages, chapters, and books of the Bible. This storyline of redemption gradually unfolds and centers on the life, person, and work of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.
- Therefore, whenever we are reading a particular verse or passage of the Bible, we need to figure out how it fits into this overall story.
- For example, knowing that the Ezra takes place *after* the events of Genesis through Deuteronomy, 1 and 2 Kings, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, helps us to understand why Israel had been in Exile, what happened to the temple, why they don't have a King, why they are returning to the land, and how all of this fits into God's plans of redemption. We can only understand the point of Ezra if we first understand the story before it: that Israel was

chosen to be GOD's people, they were given a covenant through Moses and the Law of GOD, with it's accompanying promised blessings and curses; they broke the covenantal Law, God warned them through the prophets, they refused to repent, and so God poured out judgment on the land, broke the kingdom, took away the king, and sent them to Exile; and yet, God also promised future mercy and grace, and Ezra shows the beginning of that, as they come back to the land and rebuild the temple. Yet the rest of the Bible's storyline shows us that the story didn't end there - it shows us that the full promised grace and restoration of God is only *glimpsed* in Israel's return to the land; it's finally fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, the true promised Davidic King, the true temple of God, who truly restores the people of God through a new and better covenant, freeing us from our slavery to sin through the cross. And the story doesn't end there - it will finally culminate in a true return from exile - a return to GOD's land, the Garden of Eden, and the true temple, the New HEavens and the New Earth, where we'll dwell with God in His Kingdom, as His people, forever!

- That's just an example of how placing a book within the storyline of the Bible helps us understand it's true meaning and purpose.
- Therefore, we need to understand the storyline of the Bible, how it's divided into two testaments, how it progressive unfolds, and how all the books fit into this storyline of redemption.
- And most importantly, we need to understand how each passage connects to Christ - since Christ is the centerpiece of the whole story, this means that every passage and book is ultimately meant to point us to Him; this is the key to unlocking the true meaning of the Scriptures: the *Christ Key*
- Since this is so important for us to rightly read, understand, and apply the Bible, we're going to have a whole Sunday School class on this topic next "semester" (after the winter break)