The Interpretive Journey: Reading, Understanding & Applying Scripture

LifeSpring Seminar Series
Lodi, CA- Sunday, October 19
Presenter: Israel Steinmetz
Presentation Outline

• 9:00-9:50am- Interpretive Journey Review
  Interpreting Narrative & Law
• 10:00-10:50am- Interpreting Poetry & Wisdom
• 11:00-11:50am- Interpreting Prophecy & Apocalyptic Literature
• 12:00-12:50pm- Interpreting the Gospels
  • Lunch Break
• 2:00-2:50pm- Interpreting Acts
• 3:00-3:50pm- Interpreting the Letters
This presentation is adapted in large part from:

Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting and Applying the Bible,

by J. Scott Duvall & J. Daniel Hays
The Interpretive Journey

• Step One- Grasping the Text in Their Town

• Step Two- Measuring the Width of the River to Cross

• Step Three- Crossing the Principlizing Bridge

• Step Four- Grasping the Text in Our Town
The Interpretive Journey

- **Step One- Grasping the Text in their Town**
- **Key Question:** *What did the text mean to the original audience?*
  - Observation, scrutinize the passage repeatedly for the following items:
    - Grammatical
    - Literary
    - Key Words
    - Figures of Speech
  - Study of historical and literary context
  - Conduct word studies
Step One Outcome

Synthesize the meaning of the passage for the biblical audience into one or two specific sentences.
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- **Step Two- Measuring the Width of the River to Cross**
- **Key Question: What are the differences between the original audience and us?**
  - Identify significant differences related to:
    - Culture
    - Language
    - Geography
    - Time
    - Situation
    - Covenant
Step Two Outcome

Summarize these differences in a few focused sentences.
Step Three: Crossing the Principlizing Bridge

**Key Question:** What is the theological principle in this text?

- Discover the theological meaning of the text
- Identify similarities between the original and contemporary audiences
- Build a “principlizing bridge” that connects meaning
  - Parts-whole spiral (interpret passage in light of all Scripture)
  - Follow guidelines for formulating theological principles (next slide)
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*Guidelines for writing theological principles* - The principles should be:

- Reflected in the text
- Timeless and not tied to a specific situation
- Not culturally bound
- Consistent with the teaching of the rest of Scripture
- Relevant to both the biblical and contemporary audience
Step Three Outcome

Write out the principlizing statements.
Step Four: Grasping the Text in Our Town

Key Question: How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle(s) to their lives?

- Discover contemporary applications of the theological principle(s)
- Formulate relevant expressions of the application.
Step Four Outcome

Write these applications out in a few clear, concise sentences...then go live them!
Interpreting Narrative & Law
What is Narrative?

“Narrative is a literary form characterized by sequential time action and involving plot, setting, and characters. It is the story form of literature. The meaning of a narrative derives primarily from the actions of its characters. Rather than telling us how to live or how not to live, the narrative shows us how to live or how not to live by the actions of the characters.”

*Grasping God’s Word, 306*
Tips for reading narrative:
- Read carefully, repeatedly and thoroughly
- Read it the way you would read a story, paying special attention to:
  - Plot/Progression
  - Character Formation
  - Themes
- Engage your imagination!
- Put yourself inside the story
- Read more non-biblical stories!
Narrative & Application

- **Tips for reading narrative:**
  - Be honest about the differences and similarities between you and the characters in the narrative.
  - Based on what you and everyone else shares in common with the characters, consider what the story might mean.
  - Apply carefully, generically, and in-line with clear teaching from New Testament instruction.
What is Law?

• The genre of “Law” refers to legal materials found throughout Scripture, particularly in the Pentateuch.

“...the Old Testament law is firmly embedded into the story of Israel’s theological history.”

*Grasping God’s Word, 331*
Many Christians, including many within COG7 have divided the Law into three categories:

- Moral
- Civil
- Ceremonial

Is this a “biblical” way of dividing the Law?

Does this division truly provide a reliable way for determining how Christians are called to live today?

Are there alternatives?
Tips for reading Law:

- Be VERY conscious of “Step Two: Measuring the Width of the River to Cross”, paying close attention to the difference in COVENANT.
- Read legal sections within the broader narrative context, remembering the appropriate way to read narrative.
- Focus on the generic message of covenant faithfulness vs. specific obedience to certain precepts.
- Identify the precept, principle, person pattern.
Law & Application

• Given that the Law was part of another covenant, it will never be as simple as pointing to a verse from the Pentateuch and saying, “It says to do this, so we must do it!”

• Legal materials can only be applied in the broader context of the role they play in the narrative and how that narrative relates to us as members of the new covenant.

• Application of legal material vs. obedience to Law.
Interpreting Poetry & Wisdom
What is Poetry?

- Poetry
  - “...literary work in which special intensity is given to the expression of feelings and ideas by the use of distinctive style and rhythm.” Google definition

- “writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm.” www.merriam-webster.com
Tips for reading poetry:

- Look **first** for an expression of the Psalmists perspective and emotional response; look **second** for material profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness
- Become familiar with the use of figures of speech common to biblical poetry...
Common Figures of Speech

- **Parallelism** - restatement of identical or related items in a couplet
  - Psalm 2:4
- **Simile** - “like” or “as”
  - Proverbs 11:22
- **Metaphor** - Comparison by substitution
  - Psalm 23:1
- **Indirect Analogy** - Substitution without comparison
  - Psalm 22:12
- **Irony** - saying the opposite of what is meant
  - Job 38:18-21
Common Figures of Speech

- **Hyperbole** - Intentional exaggeration
  - Psalm 40:12

- **Personification/anthropomorphism/zoomorphism**
  - Personalizing inanimate objects - Psalm 24:7, Proverbs 1:20 or conversely Psalm 18:2
  - Humanizing God - Psalm 27:8; 53:2
  - Animalizing God - Psalm 91:4

- **Effect/cause substitution**
  - Proverbs 19:13

- **Representation** - Substituting the part for the whole or whole for the part
  - Psalm 44:6
  - Psalm 12:2
Poetry & the Interpretive Journey

• Tips for reading poetry:
  • Expect to be reading poetry!
  • Engage your imagination and emotion in reading
  • A friend’s quandary...how do I apply Psalm 91 to my life?
“One of the problems many Christians today encounter when they tackle Old Testament poetry is that they attempt to interpret these texts with methods that are geared for New Testament letters.”

*Grasping God’s Word, 348*
What is wisdom?

Old Testament “wisdom” refers to an informed way of life that behaves in accordance with God’s creative order and covenant orders. As a behavioral norm, this way of life can be expected to bring about success and happiness. It’s antithesis, foolishness, can be expected to bring about disaster and depression. However, biblical wisdom is complex, rather than formulaic.
Duvall & Hays on Wisdom Literature
*Grasping God’s Word, 390-391*

- **Proverbs- The Basic Approach to Life**
  - “The whole book is a song of praise for the path of the righteous over that of the wicked, leaving no doubt in which life, joy and strength are to be found.” Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*

- **Job- The Suffering of the Righteous**

- **Ecclesiastes- The Failure of the Rational, Ordered Approach to Provide Ultimate Meaning in Life**

- **Song of Songs- The Irrationality of Romantic Love Between a Husband and Wife**
Wisdom & the Interpretive Journey

- **Tips for reading Wisdom literature:**
  - Distinguish between universals/promises and norms/principles
    - Proverbs 29:25 - promise
    - Proverbs 15:1 - principle
  - Pay attention to picturesque language and figures of speech
  - Appreciate the unique perspective/experience of the human author
  - Interpret in light of fuller revelation of NT teaching
Interpreting Prophecy & Apocalyptic
Prophets were those given special insight into the spiritual dimensions of everyday life. Sometimes this insight took the form of a revelation of future events/scenarios while it typically spoke to past or present circumstances.

Even when referring to the future, prophets called people to covenant faithfulness in the present.
What is Prophecy?

- **Categories of biblical prophecy:**
  - Fore-telling
  - Forth-telling
  - Oral
  - Written

- **Major prophetic themes:**
  - Judgment
    - Multi-dimensional
    - Contingent upon response
  - Hope
    - Based on God’s faithfulness in the present and promise for the future
Prophecy & the Interpretive Journey

Tips for reading prophecy:
- Consider the broader narrative context
- Take seriously the interpretive gap (i.e. the width of the river) particularly as it applies to COVENANT
  - Be sensitive to differences in covenantal imagery/symbolism (e.g. Zechariah 14:16-21)
- Focus on the call of the prophet to covenant faithfulness
How NOT to read prophecy:

- Like a codebook
- Like a jigsaw puzzle
- Like a pagan “mystery”
- Like a play-by-play of future events
- Like “literal/figurative” trail mix
- Like it has an alternative message from the rest of Scripture
What is Apocalyptic Literature?

“Apocalypse’ 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.”

John J. Collins, Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre
What is Apocalyptic Literature?

“It is not that the here-and-now are left behind in an escape into heaven or the eschatological future, but that the here-and-now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence.”

Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*
Tips for reading apocalyptic literature:

- The rules for prophecy apply to apocalyptic
- Apocalyptic literature was revelatory for its first audience as well as its last audience
- The first rule of hermeneutics still applies...we must first understand what it meant to them before we can understand what it means to us.
A note about Revelation

- Revelation is a unique genre of literature as it combines apocalyptic, prophecy and epistle into one.
- Interpreting Revelation thus presents a unique challenge.
- Other LifeSpring courses focus more attention on the interpretation of Revelation and resources are available if you’re interested.
- For today, pay close attention to this session and the session on epistles for insights into how to interpret Revelation.
Interpreting the Gospels
What is the ‘gospel’?
- Gospel = *euangelion* = good news
- The gospel and the ‘*kerygma*’
- The role of the Gospels in connection with the communication of the gospel

What are the ‘Gospels’?
- Four distinct, but related, accounts of the ‘gospel’
- Gospel authors: Evangelists, historians or biographers?
Special challenges when reading the Gospels

- Different people telling the same story to different people for largely the same, but in various ways, different reasons.
- They are NOT like modern biographies:
  - Not concerned with biographical minutia or comprehensive detail.
  - Prone to favor topical/thematic vs. chronological arrangement
“As ancient biographers, the Gospel writers felt free to paraphrase or summarize what Jesus said and to arrange the events according to a particular theme rather than according to strict chronological sequence...The goal of the Gospel writers was to tell the story of Jesus in a faithful, yet relevant and persuasive manner for their readers. Rather than viewing the differences between accounts as errors in reporting, we should see them as illustrations of the different theological purposes and emphases of the Gospel writers.”

Grasping God’s Word, 247
Special challenges when reading the Gospels

- On steps 2-3 of the Interpretive Journey we identify differences and similarities between the original audience and ourselves.
- The Gospels present a unique challenge in that they relate events occurring at a transition point between our most significant marker: old vs. new covenant.
  - Jesus operated under the old covenant, even as His incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension resulted in the end of that covenant and the beginning of the new covenant.
  - We must be careful to measure the ever-changing width of the river accurately.
The Gospels & the Interpretive Journey

- **Tips for reading the Gospels:**
  - Read them like narratives! Ask the journalistic questions (who, what, when, where, why, how)
  - Note the **connections** between individual stories and groupings of stories
  - Follow the narrator’s lead
  - Be particularly attentive to repetition
  - Be alert for shifts in the narrative
  - Watch for special literary forms...
Special literary forms in the Gospels

- Exaggeration/Hyperbole- Matthew 16:26
- Metaphor and simile- Matthew 5:16
- Narrative Irony- Luke 18:9-14
- Rhetorical Questions
- Parallelism- Matthew 6:27
- Parables- Matthew 13:45-46
- Allegory- Mark 4:14-20
“One of the most important things to remember when seeking to apply truths from these stories is that we should always keep the larger context in view.”

Grasping God’s Word, 255
Consider the following questions:

- What does this particular story have to do with the gospel story?
- What are the theological implications of this particular story throughout the New Testament?
- What difference did this story make to the first audience?
- What difference does this story make to the present audience?
Interpreting Acts
What is Acts?

- The second volume of a two part work on the ministry of Christ (Luke) and the beginnings of the Church
- A story spanning 25-30 years of history in 28 chapters
- A special genre known as “Theological history”
“Luke was a historian because he was first and foremost an Evangelist: he knew that the faith which he wished to proclaim stands or falls with the history of Jesus and the early church.”

What is theological history?

- Draws from actual historical events
- Selects incidents that convey theological ideas

“In Acts, Luke gives us accurate, reliable history, but he has selected and arranged his material for theological purposes.”

*Grasping God’s Word, 268*
Tips for reading the book of Acts:

- Acts is a narrative...so read it like one!
- Acts is telling a story with a few central characters:
  - The Holy Spirit
  - Peter
  - Paul
Tips for reading the book of Acts:

- Acts does not dictate behavior, rather it contrasts different responses to God’s work in the Church.
- Acts is telling a story with a handful of central themes:
  - The Holy Spirit
  - God’s Sovereignty
  - The Church
  - Prayer
  - Suffering
  - Gentiles
  - Witness
Acts & Application

- The river is narrowing, but is still very wide!
- Same covenant...different world.
- Focus on theological themes that emerge from the story and consider contemporary applications.
- Balance with imperative statements from the Epistles.
Interpreting the Letters
Like the rest of Scripture, the Epistles were written “for” us, but not “to” us

Each letter was “occasional” in nature
- Unique author
- Unique, and varied, recipients
- Unique relationship between author and recipients
- Unique situation/issues/problems

Should we read other people’s mail and consider it authoritative for us?
Letters to the people of God

- As people of God in the same covenant as the recipients of NT letters we have much to gain from them.
- Epistles address real life scenarios based on a theological foundation.
- The foundation remains the same, even if the real life situations and application may change.
  - In some cases, we face the same real life situations and applications.
  - In other cases, we must utilize the theological principles to face our own unique circumstances
- The NT does not provide us a with “case law” as provided in the OT. It does provide principles and directions for living life.
Tips for reading the Epistles:

- Read it like a letter...start to finish whenever possible
- Answer basic questions:
  - Who was the author?
  - What was his background?
  - When did he write?
  - What was the nature of his ministry?
  - What kind of relationship did he have with the audience?
  - Why was he writing?
  - Who was the biblical audience?
  - What were their circumstances and situation?
  - How was their relationship with God?
  - Historical and cultural factors?
Tips for reading the Epistles:

- Carefully consider the author(s) and recipients’ point of view.
- Follow the author’s lead in drawing inferences, coming to conclusions, and making applications.
- Carefully consider how your chosen passage relates to the entire letter.
- Pay close attention to the underlying principles that support the author’s instruction.
Letters & the Interpretive Journey

• Tips for reading the Epistles:
  • Watch for common figures of speech
    • Simile (“like” or “as”) - 2 Peter 3:8
    • Metaphor – Hebrews 12:29
    • Irony/Sarcasm - 2 Corinthians 12:13
The Epistles are the easiest portion of Scripture to apply to our everyday lives.

- **CAUTION:** This is a double-edged sword!

Focus on Steps 1 & 2 of the Journey...they are just as important in discovering proper application.

Remember...no letter or portion of a letter in the NT is intended to provide the complete picture or “last word”.

Carefully harmonize the various voices in the Epistles to hear a full message.
The Deadly P’s:
Common Pitfalls in Bible Study

1. **Pride**
   - Stay humble before God, the Word and the Body
   - Learn how much you don’t know!

2. **Poor resources**
   - Get help in selecting resources
   - Don’t become dependent upon one author/view

3. **Private interpretation**
   - If you’re the only one who thinks it’s true...you’re probably wrong!

4. **Paralysis**
   - Start where you are and grow; don’t be discouraged!