

**Core Seminar**

**How to Study the Bible**

**Class 3: Studying the Old and New Testaments**

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*And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.* (2 Peter 1:19)

**Pray**

**Introduction**

Good morning! We are in week three of our class and over the last couple of weeks we’ve considered some of the basics of bible study. In weeks one and two of our class, we walked through the inductive bible study method—observation, interpretation, and application or, to put it another way, “What does it say?” “What does it mean?” and “What does it mean for me?” **This morning we are going to consider some of the unique principles you need to know in order to faithfully interpret both the Old and New Testaments.** These principles or “lenses” will serve as “interpretational guardrails” that will keep you on the right path to correct interpretation. If you are interested in a fuller overview of the OT and NT, we have an entire core seminar track on both testaments.

1. **Interpreting the Old Testament**

It’s been said that interpreting the Old Testament is a bit like being watched while you carve a chicken. It’s fairly easy to start well, but you quickly have to make some tricky decisions (about which everyone has an opinion), and it’s very easy to end up in a sticky mess with lots of parts left over that no one knows what to do with.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Nevertheless, despite the challenges of interpreting the Old Testament, it remains God’s Word. In fact, most of our Bible is made up of the Old Testament. So let’s walk through five “interpretive lenses” to help us humbly examine and rightly interpret Old Testament texts. Now, some of these “lenses” can and should also be applied when interpreting the New Testament. But these “lens” are *particularly useful* when interpreting the Old Testament. They are:

1. Context
2. Covenant
3. Canon
4. Character of God
5. Christ
6. **Context**

Context is the first interpretive lens through which to examine and understand any Old Testament text. We talked about context during the last 2 weeks as we discussed in the inductive bible study method, and we’ll keep referring to it throughout this course. Understanding *any* biblical text (OT or NT) begins by reading it carefully in context. Most errors interpreting a text come from a misunderstanding of the context. Ask yourself about the: author?, audience?, date?, author’s intent? What genre are you in? Historical narrative? Prophecy? Wisdom literature? Look at the verses, chapters before and after the passage you are studying.

1. **Covenant**

Another key concept to understand is the progressive unfolding of God’s plan in the Bible through covenants. Theologians use the phrase “progressive revelation”. What does that mean? *(have the class answer)* Progressive revelation is what we observe as we read the bible. God’s plan of salvation is revealed progressively from the beginning, and culminating with Jesus Christ. The way God reveals this plan develops sort of like a seed growing into a tree. God’s plan starts out as a meager seed (Eve’s seed in fact!) but eventually blossoms into the beautiful flower of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Along the way, we see snapshots of the progression from seed to flower, in the form of covenants. A covenant is a formal agreement between two or more persons, usually involving requirements, promises, and stipulations that had to be kept if the covenant were to remain firm. (repeat this sentence). When we read the OT, we should ask ourself, what covenant am I in?

The biblical covenants include:

* the Adamic (Gen. 1-2; Hosea 6:7), - work and tend the garden, don’t touch the tree, a promise to crush the serpent
* the Noahic (Gen. 9:8-17), a reset after massive sin – a promise never to destroy the earth like the flood
* the Abrahamic (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-14), a holy nation called out, a promise of wide spread blessing
* the Mosaic (Ex. 19-25), the law is given, blessing promised for obedience, judgment for disobedience
* the Davidic (2 Sam. 7), God promises a kingdom in David’s line that would last forever!
* and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:27-34; Ezek. 36:24-28; Matt. 26:27-30). God says - I will do it for you.

Stare at your passage through the lens of the relevant covenant.

There are 2 other patterns that help us understand covenants and this concept of progressive revelation. The first pattern we see in the covenants is:

Creation → Fall → Redemption → New Creation.

The events of Scripture follow this pattern. Adam is created, then falls, but a promise is made and children are born. The nation of Israel is established, but they sin and are judged, but a new leader comes and resets their affection for God. That happens over and over. Ask where your passage is according to this progression.

The 2nd pattern we continue to see as we read our bibles is:

* God’s people,
* in God’s place,
* under God’s rule (this comes from Graeme Goldsworthy)

The who and the where and the nature of the rule all change as we move from Genesis to Revelation. So as you read the OT, who are God’s people? Where is God’s special place of rule? What are the terms and conditions of God’s rule?

Eg. **Leviticus 19:19**, “You shall not… wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material”? We can’t move directly from the text and apply it to our lives for the simple reason that we don’t live under the Mosaic covenant law concerning apparel. This law was given under the Mosaic covenant and applied to Israel for the purpose of setting them apart as a holy and separate people. This command is part of a group of commands in Leviticus 19 that call Israel to conform to God’s holiness by emulating the divisions in God’s creation and by keeping separate from the pagan practices of the surrounding nations. How does this apply to Christians?

Christ has come and perfectly fulfilled the Mosaic law and inaugurated the New Covenant through his sacrificial death and resurrection. The church, like Israel, is called to be a holy people even as God is holy. Under the New Covenant, we are marked off as God’s chosen people, not by clothes, but by the Holy Spirit, by being pure and blameless in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

So, when you interpret an Old Testament text ask the question: Where is this passage within the covenantal biblical story line?

1. **Canon**

The next OT interpretive lens is the lens of canon. Canon is term used for the collection of books of the OT/NT and the bible. If you’ve ever read through the OT from Genesis to Malachi, did you notice that the Old Testament is full of itself? By that, I mean the later Old Testament writers frequently allude to, echo, or refer readers back to previous passages in the Old Testament canon. The Old Testament is full of *itself*. So, for example, the Psalms often refer to events recorded in the Pentateuch (ex. Psalm 95 “do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness”). The latter portion of the book of Daniel (Daniel 9-12) is a vision that Daniel received that helps interpret a prophecy given originally to Jeremiah. (Daniel 9:2; Jeremiah 25:1-12).

So when you are reading any Old Testament text, ask yourself: What, if any, connections are made to the rest of the canon?

One of the keys to making these connections is using a Bible that has a good cross-reference system. So check these cross-references and use them to help get a grasp of what the passage means in the context of the entire canon.

When you’re interpreting an Old Testament text that is quoted in the New Testament, by all means, follow the New Testament’s lead! Ask yourself, “How does the NT author’s understanding of this passage impact my interpretation?”

The book of Hebrews is one big guide to interpreting the OT. Jesus helps us understand the point of the 10 commandments in the Sermon on the Mount. Christ declares all previously forbidden food clean (Mark 7:19).

As you make these canonical connections, you’ll begin to see what the Biblical writers themselves are highlighting. You’ll begin to see prophecies and promises given in early portions of the canon that are fulfilled in latter portions of Scripture.

This is what we do with the Sunday morning scripture readings and the Sunday evening texts. We are showing you the canonical connections of the passage that is being preached (consider highlighting the example for that week’s services).

1. **The Character of God**

The next interpretive lens is the character of God. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Therefore, take special note when reading OT texts that speak of *who God is* and *what God is like*. We can be tempted to rush to life application, but often the right thing to do is just meditate on what the passage is saying about the almighty God.

Another error is to wrongly humanize God. To wrongly assume that God is like us in every way when he’s not. Ask the question, “What does this text teach me about the character of God?”

For example, much of Psalm 90 is simply a reflection by Moses on God’s unchanging character. God is eternal and everlasting (vv.2, 4); He is sovereign over life and death as the might creator (vv. 2, 3, 5-6); He is a God of holy wrath (vv. 7-8, 11); and He is a God of mercy, pity, and steadfast love (vv. 13-14) who is gloriously powerful and beautiful (vv. 16-17).

When interpreting the OT, take note and marvel at the character of God.

1. **Christ**

The final interpretive lens is the most important. The OT is **Christ**ian scripture. The OT points to, foretells, lays the ground work, teaches about, sets up, and previews Christ. When we interpret an Old Testament text, we want to ask questions like:

* How does this text point forward to Christ?
* How is this text fulfilled by Christ?

So look at **Luke 24.25-27** in your handout. Here we have the resurrected Jesus secretly joining two of his disciples as they walk the road to Emmaus:

**25** He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! **26** Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” **27** **And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.**

Now skip down to verse 44, where Christ appears to the rest of his disciples:

 **44** He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: **Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”**

Here Jesus teaches that He is present and central to understanding the Old Testament. In fact, he chastises his followers for not seeing this. So as you read the Old Testament, ask how the passage that you’re interpreting predicts, prepares for, points to, reflects, or results from the person and/or work of Christ.

Reading the Old Testament this way was taught by Jesus himself. In Luke 24, Jesus tells his disciples on the road to Emmaus that the Old Testament is all about Him. The Old Testament is given to us primarily as context for understanding who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. If Jesus does not come and give his life as a ransom for God’s people, then the Old Testament is nothing but a bunch of un-kept promises, unfulfilled prophesies and a history of an unimportant nation. If, however, Christ is the promised messiah, then studying the Old Testament is essential for those who claim to follow Jesus because it is in the Old Testament that we see glimpses of Christ and where we learn how he has worked for the salvation of His people from the beginning.

Do you have any questions about what we have covered so far? *(Wait for questions)*

1. **Interpreting the New Testament**

Now we turn our attention for the remainder of our class to the New Testament. When we interpret the New Testament, here are four basic things to remember.

1. **In the New Testament, Remember the Basic Genres**

The New Testament can be divided into three sections or genres: the Gospels (Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John) are a historical narrative account of the life of Jesus; the gospels present Jesus as the fulfillment of the OT promises of God to send a savior for his people. Following the gospels are the Epistles, or Letters, and these were written in general to teach Christians what it means to follow Christ, and the last genre, apocalyptic writing, consists of the book of Revelation, which was meant to offer a vision of the end times to prepare believers for that day. Part of what it means to do your best in rightly handling the word of truth is recognizing the genre and letting it shape how you read, interpret, and apply the passage. We’ll go other genres more in other classes.

1. **In the Gospels, Remember to Keep Your Eyes Fixed on Jesus**

The New Testament begins with four Gospels which are a particular kind of historical narrative. They are not exactly biographies of Jesus. They are intentionally shaped to highlight the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus—especially His death and resurrection. Sinclair Ferguson reminds us: “When you read the Gospels, don’t lose sight of Jesus; keep your eyes fixed on Him.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

This principle guards against the tendency to first ask: “What does this passage tell me about me?” Or, “Who am I like in this story?” Instead, we should ask, first and foremost, “What does this passage tell me about the Lord Jesus?”

Take, for example, the account in the Gospel of Luke about Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness at the outset of His earthly ministry (Luke 4:1-13). [“Turn to Lk 4 your bibles”]

4:1 And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness 2 for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. 3 The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” 4 And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’” 5 And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, 6 and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” 8 And Jesus answered him, “It is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’” 9 And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, “‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,’ 11 and “‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” 12 And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 13 And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The primary truth taught in this passage is not “How to Fight Temptation Like Jesus Did.” Fighting temptation is a secondary implication of the text. But the main point is that unlike Adam and unlike Israel, Jesus is the faithful Son of God (see Luke 3:38; Exodus 4:22; Luke 3:22). Adam, the son of God, was tempted in the garden and proved unfaithful. Israel, the son of God, was tempted in the wilderness and proved unfaithful. But Jesus, the eternal Son of God made flesh, after going through the waters of baptism, was led out into the wilderness for forty days and nights, was tempted and proved Himself to be faithful! Jesus is not first and foremost or model, but our substitute!

So in this text, we keep our eyes on Jesus and we see that we have reasons to glorify Him as the faithful and obedient Son, who from the outset of His ministry endured temptation and yet did not sin. We, like Adam and Israel, have disobeyed and failed. But where we have been tempted and given in to sin, Jesus has not. His obedience is credited to us through faith.

When you read any passage in the Gospels, make sure that you take careful note of:

* What Jesus *did*;
* What Jesus *taught*;
* Who Jesus *is*; and
* What it means to be His *disciple*.

He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Therefore, what Jesus is in any of the Gospel narratives, He always is. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

1. **In the Epistles, Remember the Indicative / Imperative Pattern**

About one third of the entire New Testament is made up of epistles or letters. These letters represent one side of a two-way conversation between the apostles who wrote them and their first audience. These letters are written *for* us but they were not written *to* us. So, one of the key questions when interpreting an epistle is, “What did this passage say to its first recipient(s)?”

As you read and reread the NT epistles, you might notice a pattern. The commands and exhortations of the gospel (*imperatives:* ‘You need to do that’) always arise from the exposition of God’s grace in the gospel (*indicatives*: ‘God has done this’). “Imperatives flow from indicatives, indicatives give rise to imperatives. Ie. Because of this, then do this

You have been forgiven (indicative), therefore forgive (imperative). You have been made Holy through Christ (declaration), therefore be Holy in your conduct (command).

We see this in the 1 Peter passage in your handout.

“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.” (**1 Peter 1:14-16**)

But notice how Peter grounds this imperative to holiness in the glorious indicatives of God’s saving call and his holiness. We are to be holy, precisely because the One who called us savingly to himself is holy. God himself is holy. Our pursuit of holiness rests on the sure foundation of the holiness of God. If we’re his children, we should strive to be like him in all our conduct.

This indicative/imperative pattern is also common in the structure of entire epistles. Both Romans and Ephesians generally follow the pattern of “This is what God has done for you in Christ!” followed by “Since God has done all this for you in Christ, here is how you should live in the power of the Holy Spirit!” In Ephesians 1-3, Paul expounds the riches of God’s grace towards us in Jesus. That’s indicative. And in Ephesians 4-6, the Apostle draws out implications and applies and exhorts his readers to holiness. Paul’s letter to the Romans is generally understood as indicative (chs. 1-11) followed by imperative (chs. 12-16). Learn this pattern and look for it in the epistles.

1. **In Application, Remember What Scripture Is For**

Studying the New Testament (and the Old Testament!) is profitable for your life and for your doctrine. We conclude with a reminder that our study of the New Testament should have the aim of obedience. Jesus commanded his disciples to make disciples and to teach them to “observe everything that I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20) God forbid that we would be those who study the New Testament and gaze into the mirror of God’s perfect word, only to walk away unchanged and unaffected. We should strive to be doers of the word and not just hearers only. (James 1:22)

**Conclusion**

The OT and NT are rich treasures of truth, but we must read and interpret them correctly. May we use these lenses and principles as we study so that we understand the scriptures correctly, so that we know and understand God’s great plan, so that we can know how we can be a part of that plan, and therefore honor and praise our good holy and sovereign God.

Ezra 7:10 says:

For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Let us be like Ezra.

**Pray.**

1. This analogy was modified from Andrew Errington, as quoted in Brian Rosner, *Paul and the Law* (IVP: 2013), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sinclair Ferguson, From the Mouth of God (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2014), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)