

**Core Seminar**

**How To Study the Bible**

**Class 9: Structure & Parallelism**

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Last week we discussed the value of looking at Scripture in view of the author’s intent and its context- seeing the value of reading larger passages rather than isolated verses. Today we’re going to discuss two more important interpretive tools, structure and parallelism, which are both designed to help you break up larger sections of scripture to help you better understanding their meaning. Let’s start with structure.

1. **I. Structure**

Building on last week’s idea of context, we want to ask ourselves two questions when we’re trying to understand the structure of a passage:

* + 1. Has the author divided his material into sections?
    2. How do those sections fit together?

That first question is key. Not all portions of Scripture have an overarching structure to them. But when a book appears put together in a particular pattern or order, it’s important that we understand what that structure is. That way we can see more clearly what the author is trying to do at each point in the book.

Now, Structure can be at the book level or at a lower level. An example of structure at a book level, would be the book of Daniel. We’ll flip from the outside of the book in so you can see what he’s doing. Start in chapter 1. The book starts out with the nation going into exile. Now flip back to chapter 9. Now, seventy years have passed and it’s time for the nation to *return* from exile. Back to chapter 2. It’s a dream by Nebuchadnezzar about four different kingdoms. Chapters 7-8. Dreams by Daniel of four different kingdoms. Chapter 3: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego face certain death because they refuse to worship the king—and God rescues them! Chapter 6: Daniel faces certain death because he refuses to pray to the king—and God rescues him! Chapter 4: Nebuchadnezzar is warned by God and then judged. Chapter 5: Belshazzar is warned by God and then judged. And right in the middle, between chapters 4 and 5, is the most astounding statement in the book. Nebuchadnezzar, who had conquered God’s people and brought them into exile, confesses this in 4:34-35:

**34**I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever,

for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
    and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;  
**35**all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,  
    and he does according to his will among the host of heaven  
    and among the inhabitants of the earth;  
and none can stay his hand  
    or say to him, “What have you done?”

Isn’t that amazing! Even the man who destroyed the temple is now bowing his knee to the greater King.

So, do you think you could appreciate Daniel if you didn’t see this structure? Of course. But clearly Daniel assembled his material in a particular pattern. And we can better understand his purpose for the book if we also note the structure.

For structure at a lower level in a text, turn to Isaiah 40. Look how Isaiah opens verse 3? “A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” Then in verse 6: “A voice says, ‘Cry!’ and I said, ‘What shall I cry?” Then in verse 9: “lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news.” Three different voices. Three different sections. If you’re studying Isaiah 40, you should treat each section introduced by a different “voice” as a distinct piece. And then figure out how these three pieces fit together into the context of Isaiah 40. It’s not as if you’re in sin if you don’t. But the repeated use of that word should clue you in that Isaiah is intending you to read this chapter with a particular structure in mind.

And sometimes, not seeing structure can leave you missing the point. Let’s take 1 Corinthians 13 as an example. “Love is patient, love is kind …” How many of you have heard it read at a wedding? [show of hands] It’s a fine wedding passage. But it’s actually not primarily about that kind of love.

When you read through 1 Corinthians, you see that Paul’s divided the letter based on the topics the Corinthians asked him about. And the key phrase that divides these sections is “Now concerning…” For example, 12:1 says “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.” That’s the text that introduces this section, that runs from chapter 12 to 14. So these words about love are actually right in the middle of a discussion about spiritual gifts in the church. Now that changes how we read this a bit, doesn’t it?

*Finding Structure*

OK. So how do I figure out the structure of a passage? Look down in your handout and you’ll see a few tips for doing this.

1. Look for repeated words (like in Isaiah 40 or 1 Corinthians) or repeated themes (like in Daniel).

Example: turn with me in your bibles to John chapter 1 verses 19-51. Most likely your bibles have correctly divided the sections. What phrase does John use to indicate he is starting a new section? A: He uses the phrase, **“the next day”** to begin a new section at verses 29, 35, and 43.

***How does this repeated phrase help you understand John 1:19-51?***

Repetition like this is the clearest clue that there’s something structural going on in a text.

1. In narratives, look for scene changes. Pretend you’re a movie director or a playwright and ask yourself, “did the action just switch scenes here?” “If not, why did the author move me on to something different?” We’ll get to an example of this in a few minutes.
2. In dialogues, you can often divide the text up based on who is speaking. For example, in Job it matters hugely if it’s Job speaking, God speaking, or one of Job’s friends.
3. In some places the structure that’s used is the structure of a legal argument. Malachi is a good example of this, as is Paul’s letter to the Romans. Open your bibles to the beginning of Romans. In Romans 1 and 2, Paul establishes that everyone is under God’s wrath because of their sin, for Gentiles in Chapter 1 and Jews in Chapter 2 before he begins his argument about the free gift of salvation in Christ for those who believe in chapter 3.

So if you see a logical progression of thought, like in Romans, it may well be the structure of a progressive argument—and you would do well to trace out that argument.

Incidentally, you’ll find that the paragraphs, chapter divisions, and verse divisions in your bibles are generally helpful. But sometimes they’re not. Keep in mind that they’re not inspired by God. Often, it can be useful to print out the section of Scripture you need from a site like [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) so you can read it without verse, paragraph, or chapter divisions.

*Using Structure*

Once you’ve broken out your passage into subsections, whether based on scenes, or arguments, or themes, or repeated phrases, it’s useful to then **give each section a summary title**. This forces you to think about what the main point of each subsection is and write it down. Don’t feel like you have to be wed to your first thought; you can always change it later.

After you’ve summarized in a few sentences what each section is about, the next step is to **see how each part fits together**. As we said before, in a letter, the sections might be arguments that build on each another, or in the case of a narrative, the sections might contrast or complement one another.

Along the way, you might find that you’ve started to outline your section of Scripture. Often, it can be useful to go ahead and finish the outline. Outlining a chapter or even an entire book can be a great way to follow a flow of thought and see how structure reveals meaning.

Another thing that can help is to memorize a passage of Scripture. When you memorize it, you’re more likely to notice patterns of theme and word recurrence that give evidence of structure—at least at the chapter level. And you’re more likely to see how the author uses Structure to accomplish his purpose.

Seeing how the author has structured what he’s saying will help us see the big idea of the whole passage.

**Class exercise: John 18:12-27**

So let’s look at an example together and see if we can identify the author’s structure. Turn in your bibles to John 18:12-27.

As we read through this, try to mark off the divisions between the scenes.

Then the detachment of soldiers with its commander and the Jewish officials arrested Jesus. They bound him and brought him first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people. **||**

Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the servant girl on duty there and brought Peter in. “You aren’t one of this man’s disciples too, are you?” she asked Peter. He replied, “I am not.” It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself. **||**

Meanwhile, the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. “I have spoken openly to the world,” Jesus replied. “I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret. Why question me? Ask those who heard me. Surely they know what I said.” When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. “Is this the way you answer the high priest?” he demanded. “If I said something wrong,” Jesus replied, “testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?” Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. **||**

Meanwhile, Simon Peter was still standing there warming himself. So they asked him, “You aren’t one of his disciples too, are you?” He denied it, saying, “I am not.” One of the high priest’s servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, “Didn’t I see you with him in the garden?” Again Peter denied it, and at that moment a rooster began to crow.

***Where are the divisions?***

***Why do you think John switches back and forth? What point do you think he is making?***

-The camera switches between Jesus and Peter.

What do you think of Peter’s behavior here?

**Some Common Types of Structure in the Bible**

*Bookends*

Let’s move on and look at a common structural technique used in the Bible that we’re going to call a “bookend”. This is where the same phrase appears at the beginning and end of a section.

**See the example from the book of Romans in your handout**: Romans 1.5 says, “Through him and for his name’s sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among ***all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.***”

Romans 16.26 says, “... But now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the Eternal God, ***so that all nations might believe and obey him.***”

In addition to symmetry, these bookends indicate that everything in between belongs together and is connected.

Open your bibles to Mathew 5:3-10 to see a bookend in a smaller passage

Blessed are the poor in spirit,

for theirs is the **kingdom of heaven**.

Blessed are those who mourn,

for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,

for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,

for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,

for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,

for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,

for theirs is the **kingdom of heaven**.

The bookends, “kingdom of heaven”, show us that this list of attributes, meekness, poor in spirit, etc., doesn’t just describe “nice people” in the abstract but instead describes kingdom people, those who are citizens of the kingdom of heaven!

Let’s move on to another structural pattern…

*Chiasms*

Hebrew writing often uses literary structures to help us identify the main point or climax of a passage. Most of us are used to the main point coming at the end of story, but in Hebrew, they often placed the main point right **in the middle** and then surrounded it with symmetrical pairs around the central idea. This is called a Chiasm (*Kee-as-`em*). ***What’s the example I’ve already given you in today’s class of a chiastic structure?*** [Daniel]

Let’s look at another example. You’ll see I’ve diagramed Genesis 11 in your handout. ***Can someone give me an example of paired themes in these verses? Another?***

Now the whole world

had [one language and a common speech] ...

they found a plain {in Shinar} and settled there.

They said to each other, “Come, let us make bricks ...”

Then they said, “Come, let us **build** ourselves a **city**,

with a **tower** ...

**But the Lord came down**

to see the **city** and the **tower** that the men were

**building** ...

The Lord said, “Come, let us go down and

confuse ...”

It was called {Babel}--because there

the Lord [confused the language]

of the whole world

Having identified the pairs, ***can someone identify what the central statement is?***

Answer: “But the LORD came down”

This is the turning point in the story. The writer uses the structure to emphasize the main point **of God intervening in the people’s great act of sin**.

1. **II. Parallels**

We looked at parallels a little bit when we looked at the genre of poetry.

Instead of using rhymes like the poetry many of us are used to, Hebrew poetry uses parallels.

Example: Psalm 24:1-2

1The **earth** is the LORD’s, and everything in it,

the **world**, and all who live in it;

2for he **founded it** upon the seas

and **established it** upon the waters.

Can you see how the two halves of each verse parallel each other? The same thing is said twice. This is an example of synonymous parallelism.

There are other variations of parallelism.

One is ***antithetical*** parallelism where the second half of the verse gives the opposite perspective to the first half. See the example of Proverbs 29:11 on your handout:

“A fool give **full vet to his anger**,

but a wise man **keeps himself under control**”

Another is ***chiastic*** (Kee-a-stick) parallelism where the second half of the verse says the same thing as the first half but flips the word order. See the example of Psalm 124.4-5 on your handout:

“The torrent would have gone

**over us**;

Then **over us**

would have gone the raging waters.”

Notice how the “us” is actually visually engulfed by “the torrent” and the “raging waters”, which is exactly the point of the verses. These are difficult to see in English since English word order is different from the Hebrew. The intentions the publishers include help us.

**Parallelism shows us meaning**

Parallelism is nice poetry, but it also helps us grasp the meaning of the passage. For one, it can give you two chances to understand something. If you don’t understand the first phrase, maybe you will understand its parallel.

Example: Isaiah 55:6

Seek the LORD while he may be found;

Call on him while he is near.

If you just read the first sentence, you may wonder what Isaiah means by “seek the LORD”, however the verse is explained further in the 2nd line: “call on him while he is near”.

“Seek the LORD” is paralleled with “call on him”, so how do we go about seeking God?

By calling on him, most likely in prayer. So the parallelism helps us understand the meaning.

Example: John 6:54 and John 6:40 (class looks up)

What does John mean in 6.54 by, “whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.” **Is he talking about the LORD’s supper or cannibalism?**

An earlier verse (40), helps us understand it. The beginning of verse 40 says, “For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life. Both verses end with, “and I will raise them up at the last day”, showing us that the introductory phrases are parallel. Therefore, “eating my flesh and blood” is a metaphorical way of saying, “look to the Son and believing in him”.

Example: 2 Tim. 2.13 in the context of 11-13 (class looks up)

Read the 2 Timothy 2:13 on the very back of your hand out. **What do you think it means?**

“If we are faithless,

he will remain faithful,

for he cannot disown himself”

I will give you two options:

**(1) Even if we are unfaithful, God will remain faithful to us.**

**(2) Beware of being unfaithful, because if you are, God will remain faithful to his own character and turn his back on you who are unfaithful.**

Raise your hand if you think it’s option 1. Raise your hand if you think it’s option 2.

Let’s look at our passage in context, please turn in your bibles to 2 Timothy 2.

Context: 2 Tim. 2.11-13

1If we died with him,   2  we will also live with him; 3if we endure,   4   we will also reign with him. 5If we disown him,   6   he **will also disown us**; 6if we are faithless,   7   he **will remain faithful (to his character)**,     8 for he cannot disown himself.

So based on the parallels, which option is the right meaning?

Far from suggesting that faithlessness on our part doesn’t matter, Paul is warning that it has great consequences. When Paul says “faithless,” he doesn’t mean weak faith. We come to understand what “faithless” means by looking at its parallel. What’s parallel to “faithless”?

A: “disown him”

So what Paul is saying is that if we reject Jesus, if we disown God’s messiah, He will disown us – because by disowning Jesus, we are rejecting the very source of salvation and forgiveness!

That’s one way that parallelism can convey meaning. The second is that one statement can amplify the other. Take a look at the end of Psalm 62.

**11Once** God has spoken;  
    **twice** have I heard this:  
that **power** **belongs** to God,  
**12**    and that to you, O Lord, **belongs** **steadfast** **love**.  
For you will render to a man  
    according to his work.

God’s spoken one thing but I’ve heard two things. Do I need to get my hearing checked? No. This is another example of parallelism.

But this time the one thing God has spoken is in parallel with the two things I’ve heard.

Because this is parallelism, they’re both referring to the same thing.

That God is powerful AND loving.

In so many ways, this is the Bible’s most profound answer to the problem of evil. How can God be good and in control if the world’s so rotten? We tend to pit his power and his love against each other.

But this passage is telling us that, even though we perceive these as two different—and seemingly contradictory aspects of God—they emerge from the unity of his character. “*Once* God has spoken.” From his perspective, there is perfect unity of all he does. And to him, there is not even the appearance of conflict between his power and his love. Which is profoundly reassuring to us.