

Understanding the Bible - Part 2

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Father, we do thank you that time in your word is good for us.! And we want to pray that this evening would be useful.! We thank you. We thank you that your word is intelligible to us, that you've not obscured the realities of who you are and what you're like, but that you have made them plain for us in your word, and that we are able to read and understand because of the way that you have made us and because of the way that you have written your word.

And we pray that that's a task that we would get better and better at. And maybe this evening would be a small step forward in that task, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, if you remember back to last week, we were thinking about how to understand the Bible.

And I suppose it, in a sense, is experimental because it's a bit more seminary than it is a sermon, right? So it's a bit more training than it is teaching. And we thought particularly about a couple of things.

We thought first that the Bible has a divine author, so the Bible has a coherent message to tell from the beginning to the end. The Lord superintends the message of the Bible, and so he is the author who stands behind it.

And yet it also has human authors, those people who write the Bible, who write it in a particular context at a particular time, and who, while not compromising the authority or divine intent behind the book, also bring their personalities to bear on the text as well.

[1 : 2 6] So that it is understanding them and their situation that also helps us understand what God is saying through them as the divine author. We then said, too, that our main responsibility when we read the Bible is to see then the author's purpose, both the human author, but also behind that, the divine author.

And we're to ask the question, what is the point of this passage? What is being said and why is it being said? What is the intent of this piece of Scripture? We said, if you might remember, that the job of a responsible Bible reader or preacher or teacher was to make sure, as far as they are able, that the point of their talk or the point of their Bible study or the point of their kids' talk is the author's point in that passage in the Bible.

Because if we take the Bible and make it say something that it is not intending to say, we might say something that's true, but we might also say something that is not true, and we can end up in all kinds of mess.

As we looked at last week, we found that the devil himself loves to use God's Word to teach things which are not the point of the Bible. Now, this evening, we're going to look a little bit further and pick up another couple of additional tools from that book, Dig Deeper, which I held up last week and which Florence took from me.

So she's reading it and so I haven't got it to hold up. But anyway, the first thing we're going to look at is the context tool, the context tool. So reading a passage in its context.

[3 : 0 1] Now, the book's example, so Andrew Satch and Nigel Byron's example of this, dates the book, I think, a bit, because they talk about the difference between an encyclopedia and a novel. Who has an encyclopedia today, right?

Nobody. We have ChatGPT for that. But I guess, Mike, you have encyclopedias, do you, in your home? Yeah. The tailors have encyclopedias, all of them. So there you go.

But an encyclopedia, when you turn and look up something in an encyclopedia, then what it says on a given subject is totally unrelated to the entry that's above it or below it, right? It is just an isolated piece of information.

So if you look up London, it doesn't matter if before it comes lobsters and after it comes lounges or something. Am I alphabetically correct? I think I am.

Right? That they have nothing to do with London. It's just the way that it is structured. And if you approached a novel like that, so if you just opened a novel and randomly read a paragraph as if it was isolated from everything around it, you would end up not really understanding what the book was about and you'd be quickly confused and probably give up reading.

[4 : 10] But that approach, the encyclopedia approach, is the approach that is often taken by Bible readers that we expect to sort of randomly pick out a section of the Bible and presume that it is written directly to us to answer the question that we had on our hearts as we opened it and not written in a specific context with something that goes before it and below it, which dictate what it means.

Now, one thing that is pointed out in the book is that the context of a Bible passage is rich and complex. So each sentence comes in a paragraph, right?

And each paragraph comes in a chapter. Each chapter comes in a book. And the book comes in a testament. And the testament come in the whole Bible. And so actually, we need to kind of zoom out slowly from passages of the Bible to see the context in which they're given, to see how that shapes how we understand it.

Now, I'm going to try and show you that with 1 Kings chapter 19. So if you turn to 1 Kings 19, I don't think... Did I print it out on your handout? No, I didn't because it was a bit long.

So 1 Kings chapter 19, it's page 361 in a church Bible. 1 Kings chapter 19. Now, you may, I guess, recognize this story in 1 Kings chapter 19 when you get there.

[5 : 34] It's taking me a bit of time to get there. There you go. 1 Kings chapter 19. It is Elijah after the victory over the prophets of Baal on the mountain with the sacrifices.

And what I want to do, I'm going to read it to you, and then we're going to have a little think about it in its context. I'm going to pick it up in verse 9 and read to the end of the chapter. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

And the word of the Lord came to him, What are you doing here, Elijah? He replied, I've been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword.

I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too. The Lord said, Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.

[6 : 47] After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, What are you doing here, Elijah? He replied, I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword.

I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too. The Lord said to him, Go back the way you came. Go to the desert of Damascus.

When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. Also anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel-Mahola to succeed you as prophet.

Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. Yet I reserve 7,000 in Israel whose knees have not bowed down to Baal, and whose mouths have not kissed him.

[7 : 55] Elijah went down from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the 12 pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him.

Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye, he said, and then I will come with you. Go back, Elijah replied. What have I done to you? So Elijah left him and went back, and he took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them, he burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat, and gave it to the people, and they ate.

And then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant. Now, the passage is quite famous, isn't it? And so you might well have heard something about listening for what is called the still small voice, I think in the old translation, which is here in the NIV, the gentle whisper of verse 12.

So you read it and you think, well, okay, God speaks in a gentle whisper. So we need to be listening for gentle whispers. That's what Elijah's heard. But when you look at it in the context, you realize that actually is not what's really going on.

So think about the immediate context of what's happening. Elijah's on the run. Yeah. So Elijah has had this great contest on the Mount Carmel where the fire came down from heaven, consumed his offering, and then he slaughtered the prophets of Baal.

[9 : 09] But then in the beginning of chapter 19, Jezebel is out to get him. And she is determined to kill Elijah like he killed the prophets of Baal.

So Elijah is so worried about this that he tries to save Jezebel the bother and prays in chapter 19, verse 4, that God himself would kill him. Take my life.

I am no better than my ancestors, he says, in chapter 19, verse 4. Instead, though, God feeds him. And still, though, Elijah is not in great shape and ends up hiding in a cave on Mount Horeb in the end of verse 8 and the beginning of verse 9, complaining to God that he is the only one left and they're trying to kill him too.

So much so that when you hear the voice at the end of verse 13, it's a direct reflection of the voice that was spoken in verse 9, isn't it? There's nothing new for Elijah. In fact, it's the same question. What are you doing here, Elijah? What are you doing here, Elijah? Before telling him in verse 15 to go back and get on with what he'd started. Now, that's the immediate context, okay?

[10 : 17] So you get the impression that there's something going on in this interaction between God and Elijah as he believes himself to be the only one left. He's under a great threat by Jezebel. But then when you expand it to think about the context of the scriptures more broadly, you can see that there's even more going on here.

So he is on Mount Horeb, right? The mountain of God. This is Mount Sinai. This is the mountain where the covenant with Moses was given, where Moses met God.

You find that Elijah is hiding in a cave, literally the cave, right? So he is here on the mountain in the cave, presumably the cave where, or at least a reference to the cave where Moses was when God passed him by, when he gave him the replacement tablets in Exodus 34, when God originally meets with the people on that same mountain.

He then meets later, doesn't he, with Moses as he hides his face from God as he passes by in Exodus 34. But when God originally meets with the people in Exodus 19, what is it like on Mount Horeb or Mount Sinai when he meets with them?

Exodus 19, verse 16, I've put this on your handouts, I think. On the morning of the third day, so this is as the people are gathered at the foot of the mountain. On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud over the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast.

[11 : 42] Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it, like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.

Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. Now, that is the context for then 1 Kings chapter 19. What does that mean for 1 Kings chapter 19?

Well, it means here that what you've got in 1 Kings 19 is Elijah going to Moses' place on the mountain, hearing the same things that Moses heard right back when the covenant was originally given, but God is no longer in them.

Elijah is in effect saying to God, listen, God, this whole covenant thing is not working, right? You need a plan B, God, because I'm the only one left. So I'm going to go back to where all this started and you're going to start with me, right?

This would be like the equivalent of an English footballer lying in the center of Wembley Stadium and going, you know, you're going to have to start again with me. It's been a total disaster since 1966 and we've not won a single thing.

[12 : 58] You know, start again with me, right? That is Elijah there saying to God, this covenant is not working. And so what does God say to him then?

Well, he's not in the thunder. He's not in the wind because God doesn't agree with Elijah. God doesn't think his covenant is failing. He doesn't think his covenant's collapsed. In fact, he says, there are 7,000 in Israel who are still faithful.

And actually then the still small voice is a gentle rebuke saying, listen, Elijah, you shouldn't really be here and you shouldn't really be asking this question. You should be getting on with the things I've already given you to do because my covenant still stands.

My word to Moses is still good. And in that context then, the application of 1 Kings 19 is not so much listen out for a still small voice, not because God is not capable of speaking to us directly in whatever way he would like to, but rather the context says that's not the point.

Rather, the point is, you better listen to what God has said because what God said still stands. His word does not fail. Maybe perhaps especially his word does not fail when you might fear that it has. [14:09] When you feel like you might be the only one left, go back to God's word because God is faithful to his promise and will keep it. And so that, I think, is like just an example of how expanding out and seeing the context that a passage comes in, in the context of the Bible, in the context of the covenants, you get to see what a passage means.

I'm going to give you an opportunity to do this yourself, which I know you've been so excited for. So Exodus chapter 20, verse 3. What do you think Exodus 20, verse 3 means as a standalone?

Okay, so if you were just reading Exodus 20, verse 3, what does it mean as a standalone? How does the context of verse 1 and 2 change that meaning? So go for that with the person next to you for a few moments and then we'll feed back together.

Okay. Okay. What do we think the difference the context makes to understanding Genesis 20?

Okay. Oh, right. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yes.

[15:35] Yep, so we know that it's God speaking and that he's been good to them and he's brought them out of slavery. Yeah. Anything else? Okay.

Yes. Yes.

Okay. Yeah. Yeah, so it's not an angry, jealous demand, but it's the word of a God who has rescued and saved.

Yeah. Does anyone want to make me really happy and like link it with what we were thinking about before with grace and works? You know, like, you're my people.

This is what my people are like. My people worship me. Yeah. They don't worship anybody else.

They worship me. You belong to me. You're mine. I've rescued you. I've saved you. This is what we live like in my kingdom.

[16:44] We worship this one God and this God only. Yeah. So I think it's easy, isn't it, to see them as just a list of instructions, but if you see the instructions coming in the context of the God who has saved them, I have rescued you, not because you did these things, but I have rescued you so you will live like this and so you will do these things.

Great. Any other comments or questions on that? Exclusivity. Exclusivity. Yes.

Yeah. So he has saved and rescued them for an exclusive relationship with him. Absolutely. Yeah.

Okay. Let's go on to a structure tool and let's really nerd out.

One of the things that you need to do as you're reading the Bible is that you need to understand the Bible is divided up into essentially kind of like thought units. Okay. So that there is, the Bible is divided up in units which explain a particular point, right?

Now there might be, you might be able to argue that there is one point from the beginning to the end of the Bible. Of course you can, so it is one unit. But that is almost impossible for you to read in any one sitting for your devotional time.

[18:08] You know, what did you read in your quiet time this morning? I've read the whole Bible, right? That's going to be impossible. So actually what we need to be able to do is identify how the Bible is divided up into thought units so that we can wrestle with and think over what the Lord is saying in different sections of the Bible.

And the way that you do that is by recognizing the structure of a passage or the structure of a book or the structure of a section. Now you might think, brilliant, because someone's already done that for me in the Bible, right?

They've written big numbers in it and they've written bold type headings. Now often that is really helpful and they do, you know, they do help. But sometimes they're not super brilliant, are they?

So like you might notice that in 1 Kings chapter 19, verse 9 is divided into two parts when actually I think that's maybe slightly obscuring the section.

They say, I don't know whether this is true, but someone told me this, that the person who actually put the verses in the Bible did it while he was riding on the back of a horse. It was a long time ago

and the horse went over a bump and sometimes he got it wrong.

[19 : 15] There you go. So yeah, there you go. They do follow the Hebrew numberings in certain places. Yes. Chapter divisions are different and obviously the New Testament is in Greek and not in Hebrew, so it's different there as well.

Anyway, so we need to be good at reading the Bible to see the structure as it stands out. So I've put, I think, Matthew 5 with the Beatitudes. So sometimes it's quite obvious. So sometimes there's a repetition of a sentence which kind of begins and ends a section.

So you might call them bookends, the repetition of a line. So blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And then you go through all the Beatitudes and then you get blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And then you've got a section that has been marked out for you by the repetition of theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And so if you were just reading it carefully and thoughtfully and were looking out for that repetition, for that bookend, you would notice it and see, oh, this is a section.

There's something being said here about what it means to belong to the kingdom. Perhaps other times it might be in a story, so connected stories. So if you turn to Mark chapter 8, have I put this on your handout?

[20 : 29] I put it on your handout but not on my notes so I'm going to have to turn to it and you're not. Mark chapter 8, verse 22. So in Mark 8, 22, you get the healing of the blind man.

They came to Bethesda and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village.

When he spat on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, do you see anything? He looked up and said, I see people, they look like trees walking around. Once more, Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes.

Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home saying, don't even go into the village. Now if you just read that as a little section, you might think, well, interesting.

Jesus maybe kind of got it wrong. Maybe he wasn't quite up to the task. He had to have two goes. But then if you keep reading, you recognize that actually there's a section that carries on. Jesus and his disciples went to the villages around Caesarea Philippi on the way he asked them, who do people say I am?

[21 : 36] They replied, some say John the Baptist, and others say Elijah and still others, one of the prophets. But what about you? He asked, who do you say I am? Peter answered, you are the Messiah. Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He then began to teach them that the son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter, get behind me Satan, he said, you do not have in mind the concerns of God but merely human concerns. Now it turns out, doesn't it, those stories go together because one of them explains the other one.

So Peter is like this man born blind, or blind man, sorry, of Bethesda, who sees in part but doesn't see fully. He sees that Jesus is the Christ but he does not see that he has to suffer and die.

He sees Jesus as a man walking around as a tree. He doesn't fully recognize who he is because he doesn't recognize what Jesus has come to do. Jesus' healing miracle is explaining Peter's situation.

[22 : 45] So what does Peter need? He needs a further intervention of the Lord Jesus to open his eyes fully to see not only who he is but also why he came and what he came to do.

And so as you read it, you see, oh actually those things go together and there's a structure here that Mark intends those stories to explain one another. Other times, you get other kinds of structure. So we normally, we write a story in English.

It's a long time since I've written a story in English but if you write a story in English, you would generally kind of build to a point that you come to towards the end. Whereas often in a Bible, the point is in the middle and not at the end.

And so the ends reflect one another and then they build in and the main point is in the middle. And that's what we're going to look at as we finish this evening. It's called the chiasmic structure or a chiasm.

So John chapter one, verses one and two are a chiasm. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

[23 : 47] You see it? So in the beginning was the word, goes with in the beginning. Right? And the word was with God. He was with God and the word was God.

So John's point there is to emphasize, the point he's building to is the point in the middle which is that Jesus is divine. Jesus is God, was God.

And that's the way he's structured at the story. The bigger example then about one of the ways this works is in Genesis chapter seven. Now this is, I think this is, I think this is possible.

It is possible for us to do it. But it's slightly more difficult, I think. But we're going to work on it together. Genesis chapter seven is a chiasm. It's the story of Noah.

And so let me, let me read it to you. And then you can work on it in groups and find the chiasm. So let me read chapter seven, verse one.

[24 : 50] The Lord, so you might want to circle the numbers as you go along. Okay, just a little tip. The Lord then said to Noah, go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation.

Take with you seven pairs of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and one pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also seven pairs of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth.

Seven days from now, I will send rain on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I've made. And Noah did all that the Lord commanded him.

Noah was 600 years old when the floodwaters came on the earth, and Noah and his sons and his wife and his son's wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Pairs of clean and unclean animals of birds and all creatures that move along the ground, male and female, came to Noah and entered the ark as God has commanded Noah.

And after seven days, the floodwaters came on the earth. In the 600th year of Noah's life, on the 17th day of the second month, on that day, all of the springs of the great deep burst forth and the floodgates of the heavens were opened and rain fell on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights.

[26 : 16] On that very day, Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark. They had with them every wild animal according to its kind, all livestock according to their kinds, every creature that moves along the ground according to its kind, and every bird according to its kind, everything with wings.

Pairs of all creatures that have breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark. The animals going in were male and female of every living thing as God had commanded Noah. Then the Lord shut him in.

For 40 days, the flood kept coming on the earth and as the waters increased, they lifted the ark high above the earth. The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth and the ark floated on the surface of the water.

They rose greatly on the earth and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than 15 cubits. Every living thing that moved on the land perished.

Birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out.

[27 : 29] People and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds that were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left and those with him on the ark. The waters flooded the earth for 150 days.

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark and he sent a wind over the earth and the waters receded. Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed and the rain had stopped falling from the sky.

The water receded steadily from the earth at the end of the 150 days the water had gone down and on the seventh day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat.

The waters continued to recede until the tenth month and on the first day of the tenth month on the tops of the mountains became visible. After 40 days Noah opened a window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven.

It kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. He sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground but the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water all over the surface of the earth.

[28 : 32] So it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark.

He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf. Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth.

He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again but this time it did not return. By the first day of the first month of Noah's six hundredth and first year the water dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry. Then God said to Noah come out of the ark you and your wife and your sons and their wives.

Okay have a look at that with the person next to you just for a couple of minutes and try and work out what is at the centre of the story. So I'm sorry to interrupt your conversation we've run out of time.

[29 : 48] I think if you spot the link between the sevens and the forties and the hundred and fifties what you end up with is one sentence which is in the middle of the story which is what?

Yeah God remembered Noah yeah so the point of the story is in the middle of the story which is that God whilst judgment is going on is remembering and saving Noah and the wild animals that are there in the ark which is which makes the story really beautiful doesn't it because it means that in judgment God is remembering salvation and is saving Noah in the midst of the judgment to come he will remember us in the way that he has remembered Noah sorry we've done that quite quickly because I think yes go on you can ask whatever you like is that is that something that is instinctive to come to come to come to come to come so from what I have read and I'm sure that Mike will correct me if I'm wrong but from my what I have read is that it is quite common in Hebrew literature to put the meaning of a story in the middle of it it is unusual that would not be quite so common no no yes it's like any cultural difference in the way you tell a story yeah yeah good example yes yes yes yes so when it's shared orally and repeated you will see these patterns perhaps more clearly yeah the repetition tool is one that they actually have a chapter on in their book which is really helpful

I mean if you look at it Romans 6 the passage we looked at this morning basically almost every sentence says pretty much exactly the same thing and so it's just a sort of repetition with a slight addition or a tweak in the way that they say it yeah which I think is because originally it would be read out and the thing that you were supposed to go is oh okay I am dead I will be alive I'm dead I will be alive and you you get that so many times great anything else brilliant I mean really it's just a taste isn't it we could this is like a taster of a I don't know a semester's lectures at Bible college so we could maybe keep going with it at another time but hopefully it's whetted your appetite for thinking carefully about how we understand the Bible let me pray for us and we'll head out Father we thank you so much that in your gracious generosity to us you don't actually depend on us understanding the Bible perfectly because that is beyond us

Lord and that in your gracious kindness you use the Bible even in my fumbling hands in our fumbling hands and speak to us words of grace and mercy so we thank you so much that the gospel is so clear in the Bible that even people like us can't miss it and so we thank you for your generosity to us but we want to pray that you would make us better and better Bible readers who have a rich understanding of your word and through that have a rich relationship with you we pray in Jesus name Amen Amen Thanks everybody