

It's not always about you— *How to Correctly Read and Apply Bible Stories*

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It's happened to all of us

- We love reading the stories in the Bible, but we can be disappointed if God doesn't do for us what He did for the Bible characters.
- This is a challenging topic for our Bible study because the stories are often our favorite parts of the Bible and stories are what we remember the most.
- In the past few lessons we've talked about how important its application is in our Bible study. We're told the Bible was written for our instruction and we don't want to just read and walk away and live without regard for what God wants.
- But valid application based on Old Testament stories can be challenging.
- For example, in the story of Gideon putting out a fleece for God's guidance, does that mean that we should come up with seemingly impossible tests to determine God's will?
- The short answer to that question is "No"
- That story isn't in there as an example for us to do the same thing.
- But for the reasons why we aren't expected to do that and how we ought to apply (or not) many more actions that we will come across as we start to read many of the story-based passages in the Bible, let's dive into our topic: ***How to Correctly Read and Apply Bible Stories***

Starting place—An understanding of GENRE

- Let's define the term "genre"
- From: Webster's online dictionary: **Genre** means a type of art, literature, or music characterized by a specific form, content, and style. For **example**, literature has four main **genres**: poetry, drama, fiction, and non-fiction.
- There are various genres/types or types of literature in the Bible—
- Narrative, poetry, prophecy, history, letters, and didactic and apocalyptic literature—don't worry about definitions of each not
- ***We must identify each one correctly for what it is and then read and apply it with that understanding in mind.***
- For example, you don't read and interpret a poem in the same way you do a historical narrative—that's obvious, but precisely how to read each genre with most understanding and correct application isn't always simple.

- **On Bible 805 we'll talk about these various genres.** Though we will discuss them as we encounter them in our reading, I'll also have the podcasts that discuss them available in the "Stand-alone" listings because if you are reading through the Bible Chronologically or not, you need to understand the particular genre you are reading.
- Beyond all this talk of genre—what is important to remember is you are studying this because.....
- You don't want to be disappointed with God thinking he is teaching or promising one thing, when his true message is far from it.
- And you don't want God disappointed with you because you aren't taking the time to understand what he has to tell you.

The genre we are going to talk about in this lesson is: Story or narrative.

- **IMPOTANT:** My primary resource for this and other: *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Fee and Stuart
- This is the largest genre category in the Bible narrative
- Narrative=story
- I used "story" in the intro because that's what most of us are familiar with, but
- Narrative is the term preferred because sometimes "story" implies it isn't true
- "The biblical narratives thus tell the ultimate story — a story that, even though often complex, is altogether true and crucially important."
- Fee, Gordon D.. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: Fourth Edition* (p. 94). Zondervan. Kindle Edition. ."

Personal thoughts of why it's so important to understand Bible narratives

- We are known through our stories....in writing class, "tell me your story."
- When you ask that of someone, you often learn a tremendous amount about them if you are listening carefully—when we first get to know anyone, we share stories...How did you meet or what got you into that kind of work, or how did your family treat you growing up?
- Those answers tell us much more than basic facts.
- We are made in God's image and when He tells us a story, we understand far more about him and what he wants our relationship to be rather than if he only gave us commands.
- E.g. "have no other gods before me." is a basic, foundational command, but what does it mean, what does it look like when lived out?
- For Israel, when they disobeyed—We see the

results in the stories about them....When they followed other nations in worshipping other gods—child sacrifice, immorality, lack of God’s blessings, strife at all levels of society and ultimately captivity away from the Promised land was the result. With the stories, the narratives that follow the commands, we see their meaning in human life.

Book says: 3 Levels of OT Narrative

- Top level= the whole, universal plan of God worked out through His Creation
- Middle level= centers on Israel, the big picture of the call of Abraham, forming a people, bondage, deliverance, taking the land, destruction and restoration
- Bottom level: Individual stories
 - All OT characters had imperfections, but used by God.
 - Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Sampson, Solomon a great example
- ***In final analysis, God is the hero of all Biblical narratives, all levels.***
- Remember every story part of a the Bigger Story**must study/know the context, e.g. Gideon and Sampson’s stories have so much more meaning when you understand the setting of the book of Judges, the cycles of oppression and deliverance in the book and the results of “everyone doing what was right in their own eyes”but that’s getting ahead of the story we’ll talk about when we get to Judges***which Bible805 will help you do!

With that in mind, Some overall Guidelines for Interpreting Narratives, from *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth*

- **OT narratives are not just stories about people who lived in OT times. They are first and foremost stories about what GOD did to and through those people.**
 - Eg. story of Ruth, God’s care in the midst of troubled times and ultimately about the formation of line of David and Jesus
- **OT narratives do not necessarily teach directly, they often illustrate what is taught directly and categorically elsewhere.**
 - You are expected to know the explicit teaching.
 - Eg. Judges, doesn’t repeat commands of Deut., shows what happens when not obeyed
- **Narratives record what happened, not necessarily what should have happened.**
 - What people do in narratives is not

necessarily a good example. Frequently it is just the opposite.

- Eg. Israel commanded to destroy Canaanites. God had granted them (Canaanites) over 400 years of mercy, no repentance. Gross immorality, idol worship culminating in sacrificing children—Molech, burning them alive. A horror in and of itself, but....
- When Israel did not destroy them, they were a constant problem, threat, oppressors and tempters—ultimately the downfall of Solomon, the greatest king and split of the kingdom.
- God’s recording of an event doesn’t mean his blessing of it.

More from Gordon and Fee

- We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge this on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in Scripture. (again, he expects us to read the whole thing)
- All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given
 - John 21:25 And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written
 - **John 28: 30** And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.
- What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.
- Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific, limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere in other ways. (or sometimes not at all)

Fee, Gordon D.. How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: Fourth Edition (p. 111). Zondervan. Kindle Edition

Why do people make mistakes in interpretation

- First, they are desperate, desperate for information that will help them in their situation
- Second, they are impatient, they want answers now, from this book, this passage
- Third, they wrongly expect that everything in the Bible applies to them individually

- Fourth, they don't take time to get to know the Bible well enough to know God's will
- The Bible is not a book of magic spells to be pulled out and used whenever wanted
- Knowing, understanding, and living according to God's Word is a way of life you cultivate as a follower of Jesus

Solutions/Applications

- Read the whole Bible, whole books, whole chapters
- Do what you are doing (reading the Bible as a whole, listening to these lessons) to understand context and history.
- In humility, discern what is applicable to individuals and what overall lessons we can learn
 - All written for our instruction—but perhaps not specifically to or for us...
- **Read also (one of the most important things) to get to know, really know your God.**
- When you read the narratives, you will see how consistent he is in his actions towards his children.
- Though you cannot grab a specific situation and say that because God did this for this or that Bible character he will also do it for you, you can make assumptions based on how he acts

An Infamous example Jer.29:11, show how misused and then how we can use it

- Always used as a primary example of bad application
- For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.
- Historical setting—a letter written to the exiles in Babylon
- Though we can't apply it precisely to us (and wouldn't want to as he talks about the blessings coming in 70 years), if we continue to read ALL the Bible stories, in the Old and New Testament, what do we see?

God's continuing love and grace

- Though Israel sinned greatly they made it into the promised land
- Through Judges, constant sin, constant deliverance
- Prophets, calling people back to God—ignored, killed, the people punished but God took care of them in every circumstance and brought them back into the Land

And More.....in the Psalms....

- ^{Ps 37: 23} The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way.
- ²⁴ Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast

down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand.

- In the New Testament....Jesus told his followers...
- Hairs of head numbers
- Of more value than many sparrows
- We are promised heaven, an eternity without sickness or tears
- We do have a future and a hope promised in all the stories of the Bible—but one thing we read in them all is that though our ultimate goal and good is guaranteed, the timing isn't
- ***So in many ways we can appropriate Jer. 29:11, in trusting in God's ultimate good for us, but most likely not in the way or timing we prefer.***

So what to do

- Keep reading & studying & listening to God's Word and lessons on it—it is the most important project of your life
- Learn how God works, thinks, what matters to Him
- Don't look for answers in difficult questions if you aren't obedient in obvious situations—Back to the starting story about Gideon—he didn't have God's written word, you do.
- Don't be asking for a sign or a fleece or whatever if you aren't obedient to God's clearly revealed will.
- People often ask for God's will in a particular situation, but often the answer is in applying what you already know...speak the truth in love, don't let anger control you, do justly, love kindness, walk humbly with your God
- When faced with a truly difficult situation remember in James 1 it tells us that when we face trials, we need to ask for God's wisdom—not a way out or whatever, but wisdom, what to learn from hard times, how to bring honor to the Lord as his child.
- Be humble when approaching a story for application-- don't be a whiney child that complains because they think they should be treated like the Father treated some other child.
- But like a child who knows you are loved, be assured you can trust the Author of all the stories of those of us who love him that he will one day tie up all the loose plot lines, resolve all the conflicts, and bring us safely home where in truth we will live happily ever after.