

- What is the purpose of the stories in the Bible?
- If someone does something that seems a bit odd, like Gideon setting out a fleece to determine God's will or the Children of Israel walking around the walls of Jericho to conquer it—
- Does that mean I should do similar things to please God?
- We'll answer these questions and more in our lesson. . . .

Living the Story, lesson #1

The Bible—it's not always about you

The challenges of putting ourselves into Bible stories

- "Dare to be a Daniel" we were challenged in Sunday School.
- We were told to put ourselves into the story and behave like Daniel did—good advice in one way, but....
- There are cautions in it also if we try to make the events related in Bible stories into concrete promises, guarantees or guidelines for how we should live today.

Why this is important to discuss

- Around 40% of our Bible is in story, or narrative form.
- This includes the many stories in the Old Testament starting with Genesis, the many characters in it, whose lives we know about—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David and so many others.
- In the New Testament the primary books of narrative are the Gospels and book of Acts.
- In many ways, much easier to read than some of the books of the Bible...but.....

How do we properly apply them?

- The laws are easy—God says, don't lie; I know I'm not supposed to lie.
- The stories are harder—because a Bible character acted in a certain way and seemed to turn out well, should I act in the same way?
- For example, in the story of Gideon, he asked God for sign that confirmed what he was supposed to do. He set out a fleece (an animal skin) and asked that the next morning the fleece be wet and the ground dry.
- God graciously, miraculously answered him and did that. He asked for the reverse and God again answered.
- Does that mean that we should come up with tests to determine God's will? Should we expect Him to act in the same way.
- ***The short answer is "no."***
- And exactly why it's "no" and how to properly learn from and apply the lessons of the stories in the Bible is what I'll explain in this lesson.

It's important to understand this because

- As Romans 15:4 tells us, *For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us.*
- And as 1 Cor. 10:11, ESV reminds us, *Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction,*
- The Bible stories aren't just for our entertainment; we are supposed to learn from these Old Testament stories.
- But it is important that we carefully consider what God intends us to learn.
- As with many things concerning the Bible, the answer is not a simple just do this or that, it is far more complicated.

Complicated because we can study incorrectly

- Just reading your Bible, knowing what it says is not enough—because knowledge alone can make us a Pharisee, concerned about details, always critical, picking at others who we don't consider as spiritual as we are.
- The goal of our study is to become like Jesus, His disciple, His representative in our world.
- As John reminds us, ***The life of a man who professes to be living in God must bear the stamp of Christ.*** 1 John 2:6, Phillips

How do we “bear the stamp of Christ?”

- We intentionally act like He did in our daily lives.
- But this isn't automatic. First, we need to know our Bible well, so we know how God wants us to act and specifically, we need to know how Jesus would act in a situation.
- One example, if we ever become proud of what we know, we've failed in our study of God's Word, we need to remember in Phil 2:1 that ***“Jesus, in very nature God, humbled himself.....”***
- Think of it—our GOD, creator of the universe “humbled himself” and we ought in all things to do the same.
- Back to our example, we always humble ourselves under the Word and how we can live it, always with a focus on prayer and application for ourselves, not to point fingers to others.

To do that it will help to properly apply the different types of writing (genres) in the Bible

- Much of what I will share with you comes from a book, ***How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*** by **Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart**
- What follows will rely extensively on the book intertwined with my comments and added teaching on it.
- I may not always be clear on what comes from what, but I want to give credit where credit is due that much of what follows is from the book.

Let's begin by defining 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.***
- The genres in the Bible include narrative [also known as stories], poetry, prophecy, history, letters, didactic, and apocalyptic literature.
- Don't worry about definitions of each now, what is important as we begin is that...
- ***We must identify each one correctly for what it is and then read and apply it with interpretative and application guidelines that apply to that genre.***

Why we need to do this

- You don't read and interpret a poem in the same way you do a historical narrative.
- You don't read prophetic, allegory-filled text in the same way you read Old Testament Laws. The interpretation of Daniel's prophetic vision of a giant statue is very different than the command, “Thou shalt not kill.”
- These may be obvious examples, but precisely how to read each genre with valid interpretation and correct application isn't always simple.

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

- This is the largest genre category in the Bible, as stated earlier about 40% of the Bible is narrative.
- Narrative=story=narrative=story, the two words mean the same thing and are used interchangeably in commentaries and in what I teach.
- I often use “story” because that's what most of us are familiar with, but
- “Narrative” is the term preferred in many commentaries because sometimes “story” implies something it isn't true.
- That is not the case in the Bible.

Keep in mind, “a story” in the Bible is always a true account of what happens

- As Gordon and Fee put it: *“The biblical narratives thus tell the ultimate story — a story that, even though often complex, is altogether true and crucially important.”*
- My comments: We also need to keep in mind that Bible stories are a TRUE ACCOUNT of what happened; what people truly did.
- ***That does not mean their actions are good thing or that we should necessarily follow them, but that they were recorded truthfully.***
- The Bible doesn’t sugar-coat human history. There are many horrible, wrong, sinful actions recorded in the Bible as well as good and godly actions.
- We need to discern what God wants us to learn from both good and bad actions.

With the previous thoughts in mind, here are three important overall Guidelines for Interpreting Narratives, from *How to Read the Bible for All It’s Worth*

- **#1 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.***
- For example, the key lessons from the book of Ruth are not primarily about how to be kind to an elderly mother-in-law or how gleaning worked in the Old Testament.
- The key lessons in the book of Ruth are about God’s care in the midst of troubled times and ultimately about the formation of the line of David and Jesus.

#2 OT narratives do not necessarily teach directly, they often illustrate what is taught directly and categorically elsewhere.

- This is VERY important—***AGAIN, why it is so important to read ALL THE BIBLE, in chronological order because—
- ***You are expected to know the explicit teaching behind the example—only then will the narrative events make sense.***
- For example, the book of Judges doesn’t repeat commands of Deuteronomy, it shows what happens when the commands are not obeyed and what happened when the Canaanites were not totally destroyed.
- For the stories of the prophets to make sense, you must go back to both the direct commands God gave in the books of the Law, the first 5 books of the Bible and review the promises the people made to God to obey. These books establish the importance of their failures and the right of God’s judgement.
- ***The later historical books will assume you understand and remember these things; review the laws and the covenant between God and the people, if necessary so these books make sense.***

#3 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.
- For example, Israel was commanded to destroy Canaanites. God had granted them (Canaanites) over 400 years of mercy, but they didn’t repent.
- They were ordered destroyed, because after the flood, their ancestors had the same knowledge of God as did the other sons of Noah—they could have continued to follow God.
- But instead, they chose the path of gross immorality, idol worship culminating sexual perversions as part of that worship, and worst of all in sacrificing their children to Molech, where they burned children alive.

Not only were they a problem because of their blatant sins, but it didn’t stop with that

- When Israel did not destroy them, they became oppressors and tempters—constant wars are recorded from the book of Judges on with people who were supposed to be destroyed under Joshua.
- Not only were God’s people tempted to participate and sin in involvement with the

- Canaanite's worship of other gods,
- But ultimately wives from these nations caused the downfall, even of Solomon, the greatest king of Israel and the wisest man who ever lived, as his many wives led him to follow other gods.
- **"Little" sins never stay little—they can become huge personal and national disasters.**
- In judgement for Solomon's actions, God split the kingdom.
- To emphasize, God's recording of these events doesn't mean his blessing of them.

IMPORTANT NOTE HERE—In answer to the question, why did God command that the Canaanites be totally destroyed?

- Note that did not happen as God commanded.
- The results of this disobedience are displayed fully in the book of Judges and throughout the history of Israel.
- All nations had all the initial teachings and heritage to obey God after the Flood. As a people overall they did not—though individuals did—more on that shortly.
- Their sin so permeated them as a people it resulted, as previously stated in gross immorality, culminating in the burning alive of children, oppression of other people, and the ultimate downfall of Israel.
- Sin is ugly, horrid, and lasting consequences—God is to be trusted and obeyed when he commands that we deal decisively with sin—these narrative parts of the Bible illustrate the consequences.

We also cannot forget character of God in this issue

- Would a holy and just God allow just a little bit of child sacrifice? Temple prostitution? Oppression of people?
- Based on His character, God must judge sin and He knows it must be totally blotted out.
- We don't like that because we want Him to wink at our sins, but He cannot do that.
- ALSO we must remember—God is ultimately loving—He warns His people about what will harm them and ultimately in Jesus provided a sacrifice for the sins we could not get rid of.
- He demonstrates in macro through history, what plays out in micro form in all our individual hearts, we must ruthlessly deal with sin or it will destroy us—we must learn from their examples.

As we read, 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. [This is a pattern throughout the Bible as the New Testament reminds us when it says:]*
 - *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.*
- *Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. [or ones of human interest].*
- *What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.*
- **APPLICATION—to answer many questions from people, reality is we and they must read the whole Bible to fully understand God's answer, to see consequences good or bad***LIKE ANY OTHER BOOK*****

In addition, Gordon and Fee remind us of the 3 Levels of the Story of the Bible

- **Top level=the whole, universal plan of God** worked out through His Creation [and the ultimate redemption of earth and humanity—that is the theme of the whole Bible].
- **Middle level=centers on Israel**, the big picture of the call of Abraham, forming a people, bondage,

deliverance, taking the land, destruction and restoration—culminating in the birth of Jesus.

- **Bottom level=Individual stories**
- ***Most of the stories operate on all three levels and we need to keep the upper levels in mind as we read about individuals.***
- In different places in the Bible the emphasis is on one or the other but God keeps track of and is working on all levels.

This helps answer questions of personal responsibility and fairness as we read

- ***Though we don't always see individual stories, they are always going on and are not lost to God.***
- On the fairness of the condemnation of all the Canaanites to death, we see stories of individual redemption.
- Of Rahab—even in the destruction of Jericho.
- Of Ruth, and of the goodness of the town of Bethlehem, in the midst of the horrors and sin of Judges, a godly town and the remarkable salvation of a “pagan” woman.
- As Abraham said, “Will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?” Gen. 18:25
- There are/were many things happening we aren't told about.

In final analysis, God is the hero of all Biblical stories, all narratives, at all levels.

- Because every individual story is part of the Bigger Story—God's story of redemption of His people and His creation.
- And you must study/know the context and keep in mind the big picture of that particular part of the story for it to make sense.
- For example, as you read Judges, it is arguably one of the most depressing books in the Bible.
- In it are the individual stories of Gideon and Sampson—they are not the heroes of their stories; **God is in how He used and empowered them.**
- ***When we understand that God is the true hero of all Biblical stories it not only helps us put Him in His proper place, but it gives us a proper view of Biblical characters.***
- *They all made mistakes as we do—we don't work to emulate them, but to learn about God who gives grace to all of us, no matter how many mistakes we make.*

Why isn't this a common understanding of the Bible, why do people so often misinterpret it?

Gordon and Fee reply.....

- *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;*
- *[They do these things because] Third, they wrongly expect that everything in the Bible applies to them individually;*
- ***These actions are incorrect because though the entire Bible was all written for our instruction—not every passage is specifically to or for us. It's NOT about YOU—though you can learn from it.***
- Not only are these mistakes not the correct way to read the Bible, but they can lead to disappointment with God because in reading out of context or from desperation people think that God promises something that He did not promise to them and then they get disappointed if He doesn't do it.

An example of rushed and out of context reading and claiming a verse incorrectly is Jer. 29:11

- This verse is used as a primary example of bad application, sadly by desperate people.
- It says, “*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*” (Jer. 29:11).
- People grab it, share it all the time as a promise that whatever their specific situation is that God will make it better because God wants them to be happy and—preferably very quickly.
- Can we do that? Can we grab on to the promise God will make it all better?

- *We need to be careful as we answer—it is not a categorical “no”—let’s apply what we’ve learned so far for a correct answer.*

The context, the historical setting of Jer. 29:11

- The narrative, the setting of the story is that this verse is part of a letter Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon—it is part of a narrative passage about ***how to live during the exile***.
- He told them that God (the hero, the true main character of the story) was still with them, still had a plan for them.
- Even though as a nation they had sinned horribly and suffered the ultimate punishment of being removed from their land,
- He told them to settle in, to seek the welfare of Babylon, to trust and serve God even under judgement.
- Finally, he reminded them that God also promised that after **70 years** He would also bring them back to the land—that is the “future and hope” the verse refers to.

As far as personally claiming this promise

- Unless you want to take 70 years for a promise to be fulfilled, the specifics of this passage may not be something you want to claim.
- ***But don’t stop there and give up on God giving you a good hope and future, look at the bigger picture of who God is in this passage and the rest of the Bible.***
- Again, in this and other passages, what do you learn about the character of God and how He treats people?
- That is what you can legitimately hold on to—so let’s look at it in this way.....

The larger Biblical setting of Jer. 29:11

- If we continue to read ALL the Bible stories, in the Old and New Testament, what do we see in how God deals with His people who continuously sin and even when they are under judgement for their sin as they were in Babylon when this promise was given to them?
- God never gives up but deals with them in continuing love and grace.
- Though Israel sinned greatly they made it into the Promised Land.
- Through in Judges, they constantly sin, God continued to provide deliverance.
- Throughout the Old Testament, God continued to raise up prophets.
- Their job was to call people back to God—
- The prophets were ignored, killed, and the people were punished but God took care of them in every circumstance, even during the exile in Babylon (context of this verse), and brought them back into the Land where eventually the Savior would be born.

And More.....in the Psalms.... And New Testament—what does it say about the hope and future God gives us all?

- *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 their head were numbered, that they were of more value than many sparrows (who God effortlessly cares for) and that God would care for them in the same way.
- We are promised peace on earth (in our hearts though outside us may be great turmoil), and in the future, heaven, an eternity without sickness or tears.

We do have a good future and a hope promised in the Bible!

- Because of the overall story of how God treats His people. But in waiting for that to be fulfilled, what can we learn from reading all the Bible and not just grabbing one verse? Here are some suggestions:
- *We may need to endure consequences before ultimate blessing (the Jews were in Babylon for 70 years). Your challenge, pain, hurt, need, may last a long time. AND it may not be YOUR fault—sins of parents can influence our lives.*

- *Though our ultimate goal and good is guaranteed, **the timing is not.***
- *And it will almost always take longer for the fulfillment of our hope than we want it to.*
- *The fulfillment of your future and hope may not come on this earth.*
- *God's love and care for us is guaranteed throughout.*

What then should you do with what you now know about how God works and how to study and learn from the narratives?

- Keep reading & studying & listening to God's Word and lessons on it—if you want your faith and life to make sense, you must keep working on understanding the big picture of the context of the Bible stories.
- Keep reading the stories, the narratives, not for what you can claim from them, not only what will work for you, but to
- ***Learn how God works, thinks, what matters to Him. Remember God is the hero of all Bible stories.***
- ***Get to know your God better to grow in your trust and love for Him. Your joy and peace will grow also as you do this.***

Specific comments on “putting out a fleece”

- ***Short answer—don't do it.***
- Gideon's story is an example of God's mercy to an afraid, untrusting man.
- Clear commands against this...
- ***Deut. 6:16 Do not put the Lord your God to the test*** as you did at Massah. ¹⁷ Be sure to keep the commands of the Lord your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you. (***implication that if you know them you won't need to do this***) ¹⁸ Do what is right and good in the Lord's sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors,
- Also, during Jesus' temptation, when he replied to Satan, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Concerns

- It can be an excuse to not wait for God—to short-circuit doing His will (as it would have been for Jesus).
- It can be a spiritual sounding way to avoid something, e.g. “Lord, if you want me to talk to this person (about whatever difficult thing you want me to discuss) have them call me.”
- Don't confuse cowardice for trusting God.
- Don't use God “not answering” as an excuse for disobedience.

Instead of “putting out a fleece”

- Often the answer is in applying what you already know from God's WORD...speak the truth in love, don't let anger control you, do justly, love kindness, walk humbly with your God, don't lie to each other, simply wait for the Lord.
- Study God's clearly revealed will in the Bible—He is very plain about most issues we face.
- 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 for a way out but for wisdom, for what to learn from hard times, how to bring honor to the Lord in the story He may be telling in your life.

Finally, remember

- Even though the plot line of your story might be quite confusing,
- Know you are loved by a good God.
- Know the story you are in is much bigger than what you can see, and God has it all under control.
- ***Know you can trust the Author of all the stories of those of us who love Him and one day He will tie up every loose plot line, resolve all conflicts, and bring our story to a conclusion where, in truth, we will live happily ever after.***