JONATHAN PENNINGTON

COME & SEE

The Journey of Knowing God through Scripture

"I remember sitting in Pennington's class when he presented three avenues of reading the Scriptures. I had been taught to only read in one way, but I realized this was a more beautiful practice. People throughout church history have naturally read with this approach. Let Pennington guide you to a better reading where knowing God will come to life not only in your mind but in your whole being."

Patrick Schreiner, Associate Professor, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *The Visual Word*; *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross*; and *The Mission of the Triune God*

"In *Come and See*, Jonathan Pennington serves as a faithful guide on the road trip of Bible reading. The church is in need of integrative approaches to reading the Bible, approaches that emphasize information, doctrine, and transformation. That is what this book is all about. If you want to be a better student of the Bible, do not wait to grab a copy of *Come and See*."

J. T. English, Lead Pastor, Storyline Church; author, *Deep Discipleship*; Cofounder, Training the Church and *Knowing Faith Podcast*

Come and See

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The Journey of Knowing God through Scripture

Jonathan Pennington

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On June 7, 2022, while I was finishing the edits on this book, we learned that my wife, Tracy, had a large brain tumor. Our family's life was changed overnight.
This book is dedicated to the Pennington Fam Plus crew who have grown even closer together and who are united in trusting that God is doing a thousand good things in every situation.

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Introduction

Starting Out: Road Trip!

Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.

PSALM 66:5

Oh, taste and see that the LORD *is good!*
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

PSALM 34:8

"Come and see." . . . "You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

JOHN 1:46, 51

If you have ever made a road trip down the center of Tennessee on Interstate 24 toward Chattanooga, you probably recall seeing sign after sign encouraging you to "See Ruby Falls." The invitation to come and see Ruby Falls is painted on countless barn roofs and highway billboards along the way. They never say more than that, adding to the intrigue. You have to google

it to learn who or what Ruby Falls is. Or you can take the exit and see it for yourself.

Either way, you'll learn that Ruby Falls is a stunning waterfall 1,120 feet below the surface of Lookout Mountain. It was discovered in 1928 and named after the wife of one of the excavators. The ubiquitous "See Ruby Falls" signs are an invitation to come, to look, to experience something worth seeing. This is a natural response to beauty. When we encounter something beautiful and good, we will inevitably want to tell others about it. Children don't need to be taught to say, "Dad, Mom, look!"

The Gospel of John includes lots of invitations to look, to behold, to see things wonderful. John the Baptist tells his hearers, "Look!" when he sees Jesus walking by because Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 NIV; see 1:36).

When the first two disciples encountered Jesus, he invited them by saying, "Come and you will see" (1:39). So they began following him. When another potential disciple, Nathanael, was skeptical that anything good could come out of Nazareth, his friend Philip used the same words, "Come and see" (1:46), to invite him to meet Jesus. And when Nathanael finally did see Jesus face to face and believed in him, Jesus promised that he would see much more. "You will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (1:51).

When the apostle John was penning these words, he wasn't just producing a historical record. All of these invitations to see simultaneously serve as an invitation from John to his readers. This includes us. The opening chapter of John's Gospel is an invitation *for us* to come and see Jesus in the pages of Holy Scripture. More beautiful and more important than seeing Ruby Falls is following

the signs in Scripture to come and see Jesus. This is because, according to John, in seeing we will come to believe, and in believing we will come to have life eternal (20:31).

This same invitation to come and see, to taste and delight in God, is found throughout the Bible. The goal of reading the Scriptures is not merely to gain knowledge *about* God or to learn certain beliefs and behaviors. The real aim in reading Scripture is *to see and know God himself*. This won't fully occur until the redemption of the world that is called the new creation and the beatific vision (the happiness that comes from seeing God fully). But along the way, we get glimpses of what is to come. This happens especially through reading and studying the Bible. On this side of the new creation, Scripture is crucial for discovering the meaningful and flourishing life that will last for eternity.

The Road Trip Experience

There is nothing like the anticipation and excitement that comes with a road trip. Perhaps you remember such adventures with friends in high school and college—a small group of comrades who share your love for the same music and same junk food throwing together a few dollars and hitting the road. Pure joy. You have some destination and semi-plan roughed out in your heads, but that's all. It's really about the adventure as much as it is the destination: the unexpected scary or funny things that happen, the jokes that naturally emerge, the split-second decision to take exit 32 to seek out "Kicking Ash BBQ" or "The World's Largest Rubber Band Ball." These are what make the memories and immortalize the road trip.

During a stint as a youth pastor many years ago, I took the high school kids on an 899-mile, two-day trip from our church in northern Illinois to our denomination's youth conference in

Fort Collins, Colorado. This trip required a bit more detailed organization than the spontaneous road trips of my youth. I was in charge of renting fifteen-passenger vans, coordinating adult drivers, obtaining insurance, requesting permission slips, and more. Nonetheless, it was a road trip, and it was a transformative experience for all involved. The relationships that were formed, the subculture that was created, and the memories that were born combined to make our youth group different than it was before. Through our long journey together, we came to know and love one another more. This prepared us to meet with God at the mountaintop experience that only a massive youth conference in the Rockies can provide.

The significance of the road trip itself—not just the conference—hit home when two years later I took a group to the next biannual conference but this time in Indianapolis. Anticipation and expectations were high, especially for those who had been with me on the Colorado trip. And the conference was good. However, because the expedition took less than five hours, something crucial was lost. The trip was relatively quick with just one food stop. Relationships, memories, and stories didn't have enough baking time. Instead of a full-course meal, it was an existential snack. I realized more fully that the road trip itself was indeed as important as the conference.

The journey matters. Life is not a math problem to merely solve. It is a long series of conscious and unconscious moments that we as humans can only experience sequentially, not knowing fully what is coming next. The variation of experiences between the familiar (sweetened and deepened by time) and the new (awaking us again by stimulating our curiosity) is what makes the journey of our lives meaningful. The classic road trip forges and melds together these experiences into something beautiful. New and spontaneous ad-

ventures with old and growing friends—it doesn't get much better than that. That's why we love the road trip.

A Journey with Three Friends

This book has an important subtitle: *The Journey of Knowing God through Scripture*. This provides us with the metaphor or image by which we are invited to come and see God. We are going to think about reading the Bible as a journey, as a road trip. Knowing God is not just a pill we can swallow or an app we can open. It is a journey of life experiences that are shaped and interpreted over time by Scripture. The more we understand God's words, the more we will be able to make sense of our complicated lives. This little book is meant as a guide, a map, to help you make sense of what Scripture is saying. It is an invitation to take a road trip, the most life-giving and life-changing road trip possible.

But a road trip wouldn't be a road trip without good friends. You can make a journey alone; good can come from such reflective time. But the best trips, the ones that shape us, are the ones where a small group of people—individuals with their own quirks, strengths, and weaknesses—join together on the adventure.

For this road trip journey, we're joining up with a set of three great friends: Ingrid, Tom, and Taylor. These three friends are different in gender, background, interests, and passions, but they share a bond that is deeper than these limited elements of who they are. And this trip, taken together, is going to make them better people as they journey jointly and learn from one another.

Let's imagine this is a long trip, one where the friends need to share the driving. As the rules of the road trip go, the driver gets to choose the music and the podcasts to listen to. Ingrid, Tom, and

Taylor will each take a turn behind the wheel, and each will set the tone for his or her leg of the journey.

You may have already surmised what I'm doing with these images. These three friends each represent a certain mode of reading, a particular timbre, a kind of approach that is distinctive of the person. Ingrid loves information, and when she is driving it's all about the podcasts. She fills the car with historical and literary insights. Tom is a theologian at heart. He loves to discuss fine points of doctrine, how the whole Bible fits together, and how the church has understood these great theological truths. Taylor emphasizes transformation. She always directs the conversation back to real life, to the practical outworking of what all their discussion means.

Together these three friends create something that is stronger, richer, and more beautiful than what any one of them could accomplish individually. Together these three approaches to reading Scripture—informational, theological, and transformational—provide a robust and meaningful path for knowing God through the study of the Bible.

But no road trip would be complete without the delicious and spontaneous side trips. Throughout the three legs of our journey, led in turn by Ingrid, Tom, and Taylor, we are also going to pause at a few exits to eat and to ponder some beautiful things. These side trips aren't directly in the path of our destination, but they're not mere detours either. They are enriching moments that will provide a kind of experiential glue to the whole journey. And surprisingly, when we look back on the journey as a whole, we will see that these side trips were really connected all along. They all relate to the supersized question of how we know anything (the fancy word for that is *epistemology*). Like any good side trip, therein lies the real adventure.

So let's begin. Come and see.

1

The First Stage of the Journey

Informational Reading with Ingrid

YOU ARE HERE

The First Stage: Informational Reading with Ingrid

- Reading through Three Avenues
- Side Trip 1: Maps and Seeing
- Understanding Different Literary Genres
- Side Trip 2: Reading in St. Petersburg (and Other Places)
- Avoiding Common Interpretive Mistakes

On this first leg of our journey, Ingrid is in charge. She's vivacious and vigorous and always fun to be around. When you're with Ingrid, you know it! She's passionate about knowledge, and she loves to share it with others. She's a great friend to have driving for the first stage: we know that we will be headed in the right direction, and the trip will be enriched by what she brings to our discussion.

For Ingrid, it's all about information. Her chosen podcasts and conversation fill the car with information of all sorts—historical, literary, and logical. As we learn from Ingrid how to read Scripture, we will grow in knowledge and skills that relate to gaining and integrating information. Ingrid will also lead us on two fascinating side trips about how maps enable us to see and how our imagination of the world shapes our interpretation of it.

ORIENTATION

The informational aspect of reading the Bible refers to the fact that Scripture contains content that informs our minds and understanding. Scripture is *more* than informational content, certainly, but it is not less than this. God speaks to us in many ways, and we know things in many ways—experientially, emotionally, relationally. But one essential way that we know things is cognitively or through our minds. And our cognitive faculties work on content or information.

To read Scripture rightly, then, we must focus on the information it provides that is outside of us, not generated by us. This focus on Scripture's content entails a wide range of knowledge and the development of some important skills. Many tools can and should be in our informational interpretation tool box. These include understanding the historical and cultural background of Scripture, knowing something about language and how it works,

developing literary interpretation skills, and recognizing different genres within Scripture.

Filling Up the Tank

Before we begin, let's first pause to get some gas (our friends can't yet afford a Tesla), and then we'll set off on our journey.

Ingrid gives the first words of her driving time to her beloved Eugene Peterson: "The more 'spiritual' we become, the more care we must give to exegesis. The more mature we become in the Christian faith, the more exegetically rigorous we must become. This is not a task from which we graduate."[1]

What does it mean to be more "exegetically rigorous"? *Exegesis* is the act of interpreting or drawing out the meaning of a Bible passage. Thus, to be exegetically rigorous means to engage in a detailed study of Scripture, its background, language, and history. This may sound like something a stodgy old professor might say, a sentiment that feels like a blaring loudspeaker from the ivory tower far removed from real life.

But the person who penned this quote, Eugene Peterson, was one of our generation's greatest pastors and leaders in spiritual formation.[2] Exegetical rigor and spirituality are not opposites, according to Peterson, but intimate friends. Peterson challenges us to make sure we are always doing *more* than rigorous exegesis—that we are also engaging in theological and transformational reading. But he understands that spiritual study of the Bible is never *less* than a detailed, careful reading. The more spiritual we are, the more we will give ourselves to watchful and meticulous study of the Bible. Even though spirituality and rigorous study of the Bible are often thought of as contrary to each other today, Peterson is saying what the great Christian tradition has always said.

Now for some people, the idea that rigorous study of the Bible (exegesis) is essential for *all* Christians might sound like an attempt at job security for people with PhDs in theology. Some might be concerned that this takes the Bible away from the average, church-going reader and requires that we all attend seminary and become learned experts on the nitty-gritty details of the Bible. For other readers, however, this idea is perfectly acceptable. Being academic and rigorous in our study of the Bible doesn't sound scary or bad, but exciting.

Whatever your perspective, I want to convince you that exegetical rigor is not something to shun, dismiss, or disdain. The reason is simple: if we are to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and love, we need to benefit from information that we don't currently have. The Bible records God's speech that doesn't originate from us. Therefore, to hear thoughts other than our own, we need to learn to listen attentively, to seek to gain information other than what we already possess.

But you might still wonder why learning God's thoughts takes exegetical rigor. Can't we just read the Bible and see what it says? Well, yes, we can and should read the Bible and see what it says. And at the end of our journey, we will see that this kind of simple and receptive reading is where we want to end up. But we also need to recognize that the Bible comes to us over a significant distance of time, culture, language, and worldview. We often need help to understand what the Bible is saying, and this is where a careful informational study of the Bible comes in.

We know that communication between spouses and friends often results in misunderstanding. Amplify this potential breakdown of communication across languages, cultures, physical space, and thousands of years, and we can easily *mis*understand

what the Bible is saying. Maybe even more disconcerting, it is shockingly easy to misunderstand the Bible *and not to even realize we are doing so*! Having lived in the United Kingdom for a few years, I can testify that unknown mistakes can happen when using American English in a British English context (and vice versa). One can blithely use words with very different meanings—such as *pants*, *sacked*, *boot*, *mad*, *jumper*, or *vest* to name just a few—and be completely unaware. (Even worse is misusing words that you don't realize have sexual meanings!) Exegetical rigor helps us avoid some of these missteps.

Hear me clearly: I'm not saying that we should think of the Bible as distant and incomprehensible. These are God's words, and God is always present and happy to speak to us. But wax tends to grow in our ears. Hear Peterson again:

> These words given to us in our Scriptures are constantly getting overlaid with personal preferences, cultural assumptions, sin distortions, and ignorant guesses that pollute the text. The pollutants are always in the air, gathering dust on our Bibles, corroding our use of the language, especially the language of faith. Exegesis is a dust cloth, a scrub brush, or even a Q-tip for keeping the words clean.[3]

So rigorous study of the Bible is wise and practical. We need a good informational reading strategy to clean off these pollutants and to clear out our ears.

We also need exegetical rigor for a more spiritual reason: it is a matter of *love*. As Peterson points out, the truly spiritual leaders of old were always master exegetes because they loved God and wanted to hear from him—not just have their own self-generated,

self-centered "spirituality." "Exegesis is an act of love. It loves the one who speaks the words enough to want to get the words right. It respects the words enough to use every means we have to get the words right. Exegesis is loving God enough to stop and listen carefully to what he says."[4]

Thus, when we give ourselves to the intensive, rigorous study of Scripture (not always an easy task!), we are doing so out of respect and love for our Creator and Redeemer God. Thorough and even laborious study of Scripture is motivated by affection and the greatest human desire possible: to know and love God more. This is not the stuff of dry, arid "academics." Rather, learning to read in an informational way is like the kind of natural affectionate attention that avid sports fans give to learning their favorite players' names and stats. It's like the attention and energy that any lovers of horses or sports cars or fountain pens or mountain climbing give to their area of passionate interest.

But we have not yet really explained what this exegetical rigor is referring to. This is what Ingrid brings to our conversation. This love-based, willing-to-work-hard rigor in reading is what we are calling the *informational* type of reading. But what does this consist of, what does it require, and what does it look like? What exactly does Ingrid want us to embrace?

We will explore three aspects of a good informational reading of Scripture. These three aspects are (1) using a three-avenues approach to interpretation; (2) developing a sensitivity to different literary genres; and (3) recognizing (and avoiding) some common exegetical mistakes. As we travel on the path of developing these three skills, we'll also take a couple of fascinating side trips.

YOU ARE HERE

The First Stage: Informational Reading with Ingrid

- **Reading through Three Avenues**
- Side Trip 1: Maps and Seeing
- Understanding Different Literary Genres
- Side Trip 2: Reading in St. Petersburg (and Other Places)
- Avoiding Common Interpretive Mistakes

Reading through Three Avenues

A certified plumber or master electrician must learn a panoply of small skills to be able to function well: how to sweat copper pipe, how to set up a circuit box, how to fix the leak in a PVC sink trap, how to prevent aluminum wiring from causing a fire. So too, a good informational reader must learn reading skills in several areas to gain experience with different types of approaches to interpretation. I like to describe this as learning to read through *three avenues*.

We can describe these three avenues or routes as reading (1) behind the text, (2) in the text, and (3) in front of the text. Here's the basic idea for each of these reading habits:

- *Behind the text:* This kind of reading focuses on gaining information about the language, history, culture, geography, and worldview of the times and people of the Bible.
- *In the text:* This kind of reading pays attention to how the Bible functions as literature, learning skills that help us become better readers.

- *In front of the text:* This kind of reading listens to how those who have gone before us have read the same Bible, seeking to learn from the perspectives and insights of others.

Let's drill down a bit more and look at how each of these three avenues contributes to our understanding.

Behind the Text

The Bible was written over a span of more than a thousand years in two languages (plus a smattering of a third). It was written by a wide variety of people living in places and cultures very different than our own. These gaps in time and place matter. People can read the Bible and make it mean whatever they want, of course. But if we want to be good readers, we need at least *some* rudimentary knowledge of the background *behind the text*.

While the basic message of the Bible is accessible without extensive background knowledge, some parts of it are quite obscure without some help, and other parts are prone to great misunderstanding. For example, when God says in Psalm 60:8 (and Ps. 108:9), "Over Edom I shall throw My shoe" (NASB 1995), the meaning is not immediately apparent to us. When we look at different English translations, we find a variety of renderings because of the obscurity of this metaphor. Some translations speak instead of casting a shoe (or sandal) *on* Edom. Regardless, without some help we are at a loss. A literal reading would require that we find where ancient Edom was and assume that at one time God tossed his foot apparel there.

A far better solution is to understand what this saying meant in its own time and place—namely, taking possession of or even conquering the land. This is based, from what we can tell, on the ancient custom of throwing down a sandal as a sign of taking occupancy of a

place. We could engage in further worthwhile exploration. It would be beneficial to think about the significance of Edom (which later is called Idumea) as part of the remaining unconquered territory of the original promised land. We might also ponder King David's role in completing this conquest where Israel earlier had failed.

Let's consider a slightly different kind of example, this time from the New Testament. We may ask what help background information can give us in interpreting a statement of Jesus in the book of Revelation. Jesus prophetically tells the Laodicean church that he would rather that they be hot or cold, but not lukewarm, lest he spit them out (Rev. 3:15–16). With nothing other than the text before them, many preachers have interpreted this to mean that God would rather we are either "on fire for Jesus" (hot) or distant and far away (cold), instead of being "lukewarm" church attendees who go through the motions with no heart for God. While this certainly will preach, we may rightly query whether this interpretation is true theologically. Would God *really* prefer that we avoid church and oppose him if we aren't completely devoted to him? It seems not. Being in church and hearing the word preached are the primary means by which lukewarm and cold people become "on fire" for God.

Knowing a bit of the cultural and historical background behind Revelation 3:15–16 helps us figure this out. Perhaps this hot-cold-lukewarm reference had a different meaning in the first-century Greco-Roman culture of Asia Minor than it has for us. Relevant background information could significantly affect our interpretation. As a good Bible dictionary or backgrounds commentary would explain, this phrase seems to refer to the Laodicean aqueduct system that delivered water at different temperatures. Hot water, delivered via one aqueduct system, was useful for cleaning and bathing. Cold water, delivered by another

aqueduct, was for drinking. Laodicea's distance from the various hot and cold springs meant that its water was often neither hot nor cold but lukewarm, an undesirable state that meant it was useless for either of the purposes. Thus, Jesus's words reflect this cultural context. He is saying in effect, "Be useful!" This background material is not definitive; nevertheless, it's a good example of how behind-the-text information can be instructive and helpfully guide our interpretation.

TAKE A TURN AT THE WHEEL

Read Mark 6:6–12.s

The main point of this passage is clear enough—Jesus sent out his disciples to do the same kind of proclaiming and restoring work that he himself was engaged in. This is on-the-job training for the church's continuing work after Jesus returns to the Father.

But there's also a historical-cultural element in this story that may not be immediately clear. What did Jesus mean when he told his disciples to "shake off the dust" on their feet "as a testimony against" those who reject their message?

This is a cultural practice and expression that we need help understanding. You can certainly google this expression and find some helpful (and some unhelpful) explanations. But the best thing to do is to look at a reputable source like a Bible dictionary or a Bible backgrounds com-

mentary. These can be found in print or in digital form. Here are a few good options:

- *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).
- *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. Clint Arnold, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).
- *The Baker Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*, ed. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2020).

You can look up the word "dust" or the phrase "shake off dust" and/or look for references to Mark 6:11.

In the Text

When we talk about the skill of learning to read *in the text*, we mean reading the Bible as literature. While Christians believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible, this does not mean that the Bible simultaneously ceases to be literature. The best understandings of the doctrine of inspiration speak of the Holy Spirit guiding humans—living in space and time—to use human words to communicate God's message. The Bible was not dictated to people who were in a trance. The Bible was not discovered as angelically inscribed tablets buried in the ground. God spoke to and through people who wrote Holy Scripture. Divine inspiration means the

things written in Scripture are authoritative and trustworthy, *not* that they are magical or cease to be human writing.

This means that one helpful avenue for interpreting the Bible well is to learn how literature works. Thus, we should pay attention to how writers use literary techniques such as structured patterns, repetition, parallelism, and plot development to engage their readers and communicate their message.

EXAMPLE 1

As an example, let's consider Psalm 1. Recognizing this as an intentionally structured poem (like all the psalms) helps us more accurately grasp its meaning and significance.

We can render Psalm 1 visually like this:

Blessed is the man
  who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
  nor stands in the way of sinners,
  nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

  but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
  and on his law he meditates day and night.

    He is like a tree planted by streams of water
    that yields its fruit in its season,
    and its leaf does not wither.
    In all that he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so,

  but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
> nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Let's make a few observations based on the literary structure of Psalm 1. Notice first that this psalm is built on a contrast of two different kinds of people—the blessed person (or better, "flourishing one") and the wicked. (I've highlighted this contrast by putting these two characters' lines on the far left.)

We are given a description of what the blessed or flourishing person's life looks like. We are told what he *doesn't* do and what he *does*. This flourishing person's life is not influenced or directed by an ungodly way of living. Notice that this is communicated through three parallel phrases. The bad guys are described with three different terms—*wicked*, *sinners*, *scoffers*; together they give us a composite picture that is the opposite of the flourishing person. And notice that these three lines also represent a downward progression—"walks" with the wicked becomes "stands" with sinners which becomes "sits" with scoffers. This is a subtle but powerful description of the way that negative influences increasingly lead someone astray.

By way of contrast, we are also told what the flourishing person *does*. He or she regularly meditates on God's word—that is, God's instructions and promises. God becomes this person's delight. Instead of basing his or her life on the ways of the world and its crooked wisdom, this person's heart, mind, and actions are guided by God's revelation.

Inhabiting the world this way (both what the person doesn't do and what he does) results in flourishing. Notice the beautiful

metaphor used to describe the blessed person—a vibrant and verdant, fruit-laden tree whose roots are continually nourished by a refreshing stream.

All of this provides a stark contrast to the opposite kind of person, whom we meet two-thirds of the way through the poem. These people are described not as flourishing but as wicked. Note the singular versus plural contrast at play here: the flourishing person is described individually while the wicked are grouped together into a nameless mass.

Note also that we don't need a detailed description of what these wicked people are like. We can assume their actions are the opposite of the blessed one. But we are told in concrete terms the result of this way of life. In contrast to the rooted, flourishing tree, the wicked person's labor and life are merely windblown chaff. Rather than being part of the assembled community of the righteous ones (God's people), they will face judgment and loss.

Our psalm ends with a straightforward statement that once again clearly contrasts the two types of people: "The LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (Ps. 1:6).

Now anyone reading this psalm could reach some of these same ideas. But paying attention to its composition as a piece of literature makes these insights pop off the page. This poem isn't a mere random series of statements; instead it communicates by juxtaposing two contrasting ways of life and their subsequent outcomes. When we carefully observe the literary structure, we are able to mentally organize what the psalm is saying and how its parts fit together. Most importantly, note that these observations aren't the result of some secret knowledge, nor do they require an elaborate theological education. These insights

come from slowing down, paying attention, and asking questions about structure. This is a big part of what it means to read the Bible as real literature.

TAKE A TURN AT THE WHEEL

Read Psalm 8.

How is this psalm structured? Are there repeated phrases? Type or write out this short psalm and try indenting lines to indicate the structure. If 8:1 and 8:9 frame the whole psalm, how do these statements relate to the other verses?

EXAMPLE 2

Let's consider another example of paying attention to the Bible as literature, this time from the New Testament. We can gain a lot of in-the-text insight as we learn to pay attention to how the Gospel writers intentionally structure the order of the stories about Jesus. Here we are not talking about how a story itself is told (though that is important as well). Instead, we are pulling up a level and paying attention to how the Gospel writers have chosen to situate various stories next to one another. This is what I like to call the "divine crop circles"—the patterns in the field of the text that can only be seen when you get to a higher altitude and look at more than the individual stories.

We find unexpected meaning and significance when we look at the patterns of the stories—and not just at the stories themselves.

This is reading with an in-the-text literary sensitivity. As we read this way, we discover that the Gospel writers teach us about Jesus not only through specific narratives but also through the way multiple narratives are fitted together into a larger picture.

For example, the order of the assorted stories in Matthew 14–16 is no accident. The pattern, not just the individual accounts, proves to be theologically significant. First, we are told about the gruesome and cowardly murder of God's prophet, John the Baptist, at a drunken feast at Herod's palace (Matt. 14:1–12). After this, Jesus miraculously feeds thousands of needy people in the wilderness (14:13–21). Following this provision of bread, Jesus walks on water and reveals himself to his disciples as the Son of God (14:22–33). The religious leaders from Jerusalem then come and challenge Jesus because he doesn't follow their traditional rules about handwashing when eating (15:1–20). Then in sharp contrast to these faithless Jewish leaders, a Gentile woman is commended for her great faith in Jesus and granted the healing she desires (15:21–28). Jesus continues to teach and heal many people (15:29–31) and then performs another miraculous wilderness feeding in a Gentile area (15:32–38). He then crosses the sea once more (15:39), after which the religious leaders challenge him again (16:1–4). This leads to a discussion between Jesus and his disciples about the meaning of bread and his conflict with the religious leaders (16:5–12). Finally, we reach one of the most important texts in the Gospels, the Caesarea Philippi confession: the moment when the disciples clearly see and acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah (16:13–20).

Is your head spinning yet? Did you get all that? I understand if you didn't. It would be tempting to merely read these stories one after another and never attempt to see any connection. After all,

each story by itself offers rich ideas and teachings. But there's also something more going on. When we pull up to a higher altitude and observe these stories as a group, we begin to see movements and patterns that teach us something more.

Here's a table to help us look at the sequence of stories:

Stories in Matthew 14–16

Text	Story
Matthew 14:1–12	The death of John at Herod's feast
14:13–21	Jesus's miraculous feeding of the five thousand
14:22–33	Jesus's miraculous walking on water
15:1–20	The Jewish leaders challenge Jesus about their traditions regarding eating
15:21–28	A Canaanite woman shows great faith and is healed
15:29–31	Jesus heals many people in a Gentile area
15:32–38	Jesus's miraculous feeding of the four thousand
15:39	Jesus crosses the water
16:1–4	The Jewish leaders challenge Jesus about his authority
16:5–12	Jesus explains what the feeding and bread mean
16:13–20	The confession of Jesus as the Christ

Do you perceive any patterns? First look at the *repetitions*. Notice how many of these events and stories center on food. John's death happens at a feast. There are two wilderness feedings. The religious leaders challenge Jesus about their traditions concerning eating, and he responds in kind. Then Jesus explains himself to his disciples by referring to the feedings and the baskets of loaves collected. Not only are many of these stories about food but the two parallel accounts of miraculous feeding occur among two different people

groups, Jews and Gentiles. And notice that both of the wilderness feedings are followed by Jesus's crossing over a body of water, one crossing being strikingly miraculous.

Now look at the *contrasts* built into the sequence of stories. There is a stark disparity between King Herod's opulent and decadent feast (resulting in the death of God's prophet) and King Jesus's humble and miraculous feeding in the wilderness (resulting in blessing for thousands of the poor and destitute). Notice that following this gracious wilderness provision for the people of the land, the Jerusalem-based leaders—instead of being happy that Jesus helped the poor—are unhappy that his disciples didn't wash their hands. The irony and pettiness is palpable. The sharp contrasts continue with a *Canaanite* woman juxtaposed with the Israelite leaders. There were no physical Canaanites left in Jesus's day; this is a throwback reference to the evil opponents of God's people when they entered the promised land. This perceptive foreign woman shows great faith in Jesus and is commended by God, but the Jewish religious leaders are shown to be opposed to God.

Finally, we note an *escalation* in these stories that culminates in the crystal clear revelation that Jesus is the Christ (the anointed King) and the Son of God. The miracles, teachings, and conflicts that precede this moment could be interpreted in a number of ways. Matthew makes clear that all of these events point to Jesus's royal power.

So what do we do with all of this? The ten-thousand-foot-divine-crop-circles perspective helps us see an ideogram we could not perceive at the ground level. The repetitions, contrasts, and sequence help us discern a deeper story being evoked and a bigger picture being painted. Specifically, we see Jesus the King of Israel as the one who brings a new and final exodus for both

Jewish and Gentile people, even amid the foolish opposition of the Jewish leadership. Bread in the wilderness, miraculous water crossings, reference to a Canaanite woman, welcoming of the poor and foreigners, humble faith in contrast to the Jewish leadership—all of this communicates that something bigger and deeper is happening. Jesus is the agent of a radically new era of God's redemptive work. He is, as the culminating story shows, the Christ, the Son of the living God!

Could you get this from simply reading the individual stories? No. Each story has its own meaning and application. But when they are taken together, a yet deeper meaning is communicated. This is the power of learning to pay attention to the Bible as theological literature.

TAKE A TURN AT THE WHEEL

Look over Matthew 21:23–22:46.

Let me jumpstart your thinking. Notice that this section is about Jesus's authority being questioned by the ones in authority, the religious leaders.

After the introduction in 21:23–27, count the stories between 21:28–22:46. How many are there? Is there a pattern to them? Are there repeated phrases or ideas? (Ignore the chapter break at 22:1.) How does this section escalate, and how does it conclude? What is the relationship between the introduction and the conclusion?

In Front of the Text

So far Ingrid has helped us see that good reading involves understanding issues *behind the text* of Scripture (acquiring historical, cultural, etc., background knowledge), as well as issues *in the text* (reading the Bible as literature). We can also read *in front of the text*. Such in-front-of-the-text reading focuses on how other people have read the Bible over time. In this avenue of reading, we consider how the text has been received by others and what effect it has had. This matters because we all read with our own blind spots, limitations, assumptions, and prejudices. Paying attention to what other readers have seen is a wise and fruitful approach to becoming better interpreters.

My beloved uncle used to quip that a day is never wasted if you can use a German word, so here is yours for today: *Wirkungsgeschichte* [vir-kung-ge-shick-te]. This awesome word refers to the history of the effects of a text. That is, we can ask, how has a text been utilized and applied by people in particular situations throughout history? This is helpful in enabling us to see aspects of a text that we may not have considered. For example, a *Wirkungeschichtliche* reading of Matthew 26–27 could examine how Johann Sebastian Bach used this story in his musical oratorio about Jesus's suffering and death. Bach's famous and powerful *Matthäus-Passion* (*St. Matthew Passion*) retells the last days of Jesus's earthly life in musical and vocal form. Bach faithfully and creatively presents Jesus in dialogue with his enemies and his disciples, weaving together insights from other portions of Scripture with vibrant and rich music. By paying attention to this interpretation of Matthew 26–27, our understanding and appreciation of Matthew's version of the story is enhanced.

Another example of music effectual history is George Frideric Handel's beautiful oratorio *Messiah*. Handel retells the birth of Jesus

by skillfully interweaving it with many Old Testament prophecies, set to a potent musical score. *Messiah* is not only interpretively insightful but also aesthetically pleasing. It is delightful to observe how the solo tenor sings a series of oscillating notes on the word "crooked" in the citation from the KJV of Isaiah 40:4 and then a solid note for "plain" when describing the coming Messiah's work.[5] By slowing down and paying attention to these examples of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, our attentiveness to the text is deepened and expanded.

Another kind of in-front-of-the-text reading is called reception history, where we learn how different people have applied texts in their own cultural contexts. For example, one could examine how slave owners in the antebellum American South wrongly used biblical texts to support their practices, along with how other Christians used the same Bible to argue against slavery and the slave trade (such as William Wilberforce in England).

Reception history also helps us trace the origins/influences of certain assumptions that we have about biblical texts. For example, in both Jewish and Christian history, Genesis 3 was interpreted in a way that emphasized Eve's inferiority as a woman. Jewish authors like Philo and ben Sira suggest that Eve's sin was due to her gender, and Christian theologians often did the same. In medieval Europe, interpreters suggested that the devil appeared to Eve in the form of a woman. This idea began to appear in many works of art including Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. Even today, advertisers often identify Eve with temptation by using images of snakes wrapped around nude women.[6] Reception history opens our eyes to see that the ways we read biblical texts are often assumptions influenced by traditional interpretations. This is not necessarily bad, but tracing these influences can make us more astute interpreters.

Broadly speaking, both *Wirkungsgeschichte* and reception history are part of the larger in-front-of-the-text category called the history of interpretation (a reading habit we'll return to when Tom is driving). Looking at how other people have interpreted and preached biblical texts over the course of history gives us insight into how we can better read these same texts. An important part of interpreting Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), for example, is looking at its history of interpretation. There are significant differences between how Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Charles Spurgeon read this passage. We experience great gain in our own interpretation when we wrestle with issues explored by earlier interpreters, such as how the Beatitudes relate to the gifts of the Spirit (see Matt. 5:2–12), what it means for Jesus to "fulfill" the law (see 5:17), or who the "pigs" are before whom we are not to cast our "pearls" (see 7:6).

The riches available to us in the history of interpretation are almost innumerable. This kind of in-front-of-the-text reading is one of the greatest resources we have before us as we embark on the journey of knowing God through Scripture.

TAKE A TURN AT THE WHEEL

How did ancient interpreters understand Jesus's command to "sell your possessions, and give to the needy" (Luke 12:33 // Matt 19:21)? They had a lot of interesting and challenging things to say. But how can we find this out?

Stepping into the broad and fast-moving river of the history of interpretation can be overwhelming. We often need

help from knowledgeable experts in this area. A great book that introduces this topic and gives good examples of the history of interpretation is David Paul Parris's *Reading the Bible with Giants: How 2000 Years of Biblical Interpretation Can Shed New Light on Old Texts*.[7]

One of the best things we can do to read Scripture in this way is to consult older commentaries, especially from the first several centuries of the church. Thankfully, many of the commentaries by the church fathers have been translated into English. These are often also collected together and organized by biblical books, resulting in a commentary that records what many ancient interpreters said about a text. Many of these volumes can be found for the Old and New Testaments in the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series by InterVarsity Press. More broadly, the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (ccel.org) is a free online resource that provides translated books of countless church fathers—commentaries as well as other works.

Spend a little time looking at what earlier interpreters said about Luke 12:33 (// Matt 19:21). After you've done so, you can also check out a little article I wrote on this issue.[8]

YOU ARE HERE

The First Stage: Informational Reading with Ingrid

- Reading through Three Avenues
- **Side Trip 1: Maps and Seeing**
- Understanding Different Literary Genres
- Side Trip 2: Reading in St. Petersburg (and Other Places)
- Avoiding Common Interpretive Mistakes

Side Trip 1: Maps and Seeing

I have been a licensed operator of cars for more than thirty-five years now and have driven untold miles. I have also (mostly) successfully taught my six children to drive. That part was a little stressful but easy enough. What has been more difficult is teaching them where places in Louisville, Kentucky, are in relation to one another. My otherwise intelligent children simply don't think in terms of the compass points and the spatial relations of Shelbyville Road to Fourth Street like I do. When I've tried to explain where things are geographically, they are blank eyed and impatient. "I'll just put it in my phone" is the exasperated answer I get. When my kids plan to go to a friend's house, they think of the destination in terms of minutes away, and they think of the drive in terms of the turns dictated by their phones. That is how many people think now.

I finally realized that most people under thirty don't care about spatial relations because they don't see the world the same way I do. When I think of Chicago or Louisville or Orlando, I see them in my mind's eye on a two-dimensional, color map with roads and points of interests with me looking down from above. This is because when

I learned to drive we had no digital GPS tools but only a Rand McNally Road Atlas. This 18x24-inch book of color maps had to be consulted to figure out which roads and interstates—combined with a diligent watching of road signs—would enable you to get someplace new and unfamiliar. Without an atlas you were lost and dependent on potentially inaccurate oral directions at a gas station.

It is not an overstatement to say that we each *think about* the space we live in differently because we *see* it differently. The type of maps we use enable us to see the world in a certain way.

The making of a map of any sort—whether AT&T's fiber coverage in Cincinnati, migratory flight paths that cross oceans, favorite movies per US state, or the twenty-two countries that Great Britain has not invaded—enables us to see our indescribably rich and complex world in certain ways.

No map can be comprehensive or even come close. Even a perfectly scaled map of a tiny area must make a myriad of choices about what to include and not include: bird song, utility lines, dog markings, number of acorns. Most information must be left out. An entirely comprehensive map of an area would be the world itself, which is what we already have. Maps exist to enable us to see something about our world, to see it in a particular way, to see connections and relations between mere data points within the story and song of the world.

In 1933 Harry Beck changed the world of urban mapping with his unique new graphic representation of the London subway system. Before Beck, the maps of the London Underground were accurate in giving the distance and direction of train lines but, it turned out, actually too accurate. There was simply too much information for people to interpret and use these subway maps. Beck's revolutionary mapmaking involved a simplified and attractive representation (the characteristics of a good map) of the different

train lines—color coded and with neat angles. The distances and length of stops are not represented in his maps, nor is information about neighborhoods. But riders are given what they need to successfully navigate the Underground: which train lines stopped where and in what order. This approach to urban transportation maps has now been adopted around the world. According to Peter Turchi, what Beck's cartography shows is that "the most accurate map, and the most detailed map, is not necessarily the best map."[9]

The most important thing to learn from Beck is that maps enable us to see things in a certain way, often by blank space and deselection as well as by curated selection of information. Mapmaking enables a perspective that is never coextensive with reality (only reality itself is that), but its selectivity empowers us to understand in a certain way.

What does this have to do with being a good Bible reader? Understanding our creaturely limited perspectives on the world invites us to humility. Our inevitably limited understanding reminds us of what is most true about us: we are not God. Our perspective, insights, and perceptions are imperfect and incomplete, even at our best moments.

For example, when we determine what we think is a good interpretation of a text, we should not assume that these verses are now locked up and solved. If later we see something we did not see before or hear someone teach or preach something about the text that is different than what we thought, a posture of humility is open to consider an adjustment in our thinking. We are not to be "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph 4:14), but neither are we to hold on to a sacred cow of interpretation, even if it was personally meaningful to us before. Recognizing our limits as knowers and readers invites us

to a continual posture of humility and teachability as we continue our lifelong journey of knowing God through Scripture.

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Understanding Different Literary Genres

While Ingrid is driving, information is the primary tone and focus of our discussion. As we continue our journey toward understanding God, Ingrid offers us three information-focused skills. The first skill we considered was the three avenues of reading (behind the text, in the text, and in front of the text). The second skill involves learning to interpret the Bible according to the different literary *genres* that it contains.

The word *genre* refers to a type and style of writing that can be distinguished from other types. As soon as we browse a *Calvin and Hobbes* comic, the *Wall Street Journal*, a biblical commentary, a teen vampire novel, and a college biology textbook, we know that these are examples of different literary *genres*, even if we're unfamiliar with that word. These diverse types of writing use various modes of communicating for different purposes. Each genre creates an expectation in readers and requires a unique set of skills to understand.

The Bible is God's revelation of himself, thus making it *more* than a mere human book. But it is not *less* than a human book. The books of the Bible were written by a wide range of people over a large span of time in many cultures and in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). Moreover, since the Bible was written by real humans living in real human cultures, it contains a variety of literary genres. As one scholar says, "God does not speak his word through Scripture in a way that bypasses human creatures, but in a way that works through them."[10]

As a result, we must recognize that to read the Bible well entails paying attention to many human elements that will enable us to interpret in the best way. This involves historical and cultural information as well as literary analysis as discussed above. This also means learning the ways that people develop genres as culturally embedded modes of writing.

Rather than thinking about the Bible as a *book*, we can more helpfully view it as a *library*. The Bible-library has walls, its contents are curated, and it has a unified message—this is where the idea of *canon* comes in (more on this below). But imagine if you went to a library that had books only on one topic, only for a certain age level, and only written in one particular style. Although that might be helpful in a narrow way, such a library could never serve you for the complexity and the span of your life.

Thankfully, the Bible is rich, varied, and more expansive than that. The biblical library contains many genres: legal instruction, poetry, apocalyptic (a kind of fantasy literature), wisdom sayings, instructional letters, strongly worded sermons, songs, and *lots* of stories. Together these beautifully and richly testify to God's nature, heart, and mission in the world.

In recent decades a lot of books on biblical interpretation have focused on the skill of understanding genre interpretation, so we

need not reinvent the wheel. If you desire, you can find more details in other places.[11] Here we will briefly explore seven different genres found in Scripture and how best to interpret them.

Narratives or Stories

People who are unfamiliar with the Bible often assume that it primarily contains lists of things to do and not do. This is understandable as indeed the sacred books of many other religions do focus on instruction and morality. But one of the most striking and important things about the Bible from a genre perspective is recognizing that the vast majority of its pages tell *stories*. Or, to use the more technical genre term, most of the Bible consists of *narratives*. Depending on how one calculates it, the Bible is about 70–80 percent narrative.

The narrative portions of Scripture span the whole of the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments. Not all narratives function in exactly the same way, and we can distinguish, for example, some differences between Old Testament histories and New Testament biographies (the Gospels). But for our purposes we will concentrate on the basic way in which all stories function.

In short, narratives are best interpreted by recognizing that, unlike legal documents or teaching instructions, stories communicate through means of plot, characters, and dialogue. The *plot* of a story is the path or journey that the story takes as it unfolds. Key to a plot is some kind of tension or conflict. Without tension a plot cannot exist, and without a plot a story cannot exist. When we say colloquially, “The plot thickens,” we are unconsciously acknowledging the reality that some conflict, tension, or problem makes a story meaningful. And the deeper the tension, the greater the possible resolution—thereby resulting in greater meaningfulness

and beauty. The plot of a picture book about a kid losing a plastic trinket is inherently thinner than the complex characters and plot of the seven-volume Harry Potter series.

Stories also need *characters*. Characters in the Bible are usually humans, although Balaam's donkey, angels, snakes and dragons, and of course God himself also make appearances. Characters interact with one another, causing and/or experiencing the tension that makes a story. The characters carry the story along and serve as types or exemplars of different ways of being in the world, for good or for bad. Often human characters are presented in contrasting pairs for our instruction. We see good choices and bad choices and their consequences, inviting us to think about our own lives. The most important character in the Bible is God himself. He is the beginning and end of the grand story of the Bible, and he is present in every story, with varying degrees of explicitness. Remembering that the Bible is primarily about God's activity helps us guard against reading the biblical stories as *only* about humans and our individual choices of morality. The biblical stories do relate to us in this human and practical way, but God's role is always central.

In the midst of a plot, characters speak to each other, to themselves, and to God. We call this *dialogue*. When a story breaks from action to talking, we should pay close attention. Dialogue in biblical narratives is typically where the gold of the story is found.

Recognizing that narratives communicate through the means of plot, characters, and dialogue helps us to be better readers of Scripture. The benefit of genre analysis is that we learn to interpret a type of literature in accord with how it works. Practically, this means that when we read narratives in the Bible, we should not isolate verses or portions of a story from the unfolding plot, nor

should we interpret characters' words or actions apart from the story. Stories are a complete package and must be taken as a whole. You wouldn't pick up a novel and read just a line from somewhere in the middle. You may be able to comprehend the English sentence, but it won't really make sense unless you understand how this sentence is part of the plot and character development. So too with biblical stories. Good genre analysis teaches us to pay attention to how the story works.

TAKE A TURN AT THE WHEEL

Read 1 Samuel 17:1–58.

This famous story of David and Goliath is not just for children. The more we read it the better it gets. The books of 1–2 Samuel are some of the most enjoyable and insightful of the biblical narratives. To interpret 1 Samuel 17 well it is, of course, best to start at chapter 1 and read through. But even if you don't do that just now, you can read the narrative of David and Goliath well by paying attention to plot, characters, and dialogue.

What is the plot of the story? What is the most tense point in the narrative?

Who are the characters? List them. What role does each play in the plot?

Reread the dialogue. What does the discourse of the characters tell us about what the author is trying to communicate to us?

The Law

The first five books of the Old Testament are often called the Pentateuch or simply "the Law." The "law" can also be a shorthand reference for the old covenant—that is, God's special relationship with Israel. In addition we find in the Bible many commands that we call "laws." The multiple uses of the word *law* can be very confusing when we read the Bible and think about its contents. Even more problematic, it turns out that "law" is not really the best translation for the Hebrew word, *torah*, at play here. Rather, *torah* means "instructions." And in the Bible, specifically, it means *covenantal* instructions, that is, instructions for how we are to live in light of the loving and gracious relationship (covenant) God is making with humanity.

Thus, the first thing to observe about interpreting the law portions of the Bible is that we are not dealing with God as a stuffy, disengaged, nonrelational courtroom judge. Rather, the law is the set of instructions for how to live rightly and well in personal relationship with God. The law or torah is God's gracious gift to his people *as part of a covenant relationship*. When the instructions for the covenant relationship are followed, life is full of shalom (Hebrew for *peace*) and flourishing.

Think of it like marriage, which is also a covenant. Marriage includes certain stipulations, sometimes stated explicitly, sometimes not. These are often expressed in vows made on the wedding day and hopefully remembered throughout the marriage. These stipulations include things like faithfulness and affection. The man and woman vow "to have and to hold from this day forward, forsaking all others, 'til death do us part." This is torah. A husband or wife could treat these instructions in a sterile, obligatory, even resentful

way, but this would deny the fundamentally relational and loving context of the stipulations. So too in our relationship with God.

The laws of the Old Testament address the two aspects of our human existence: relationship with our Creator God and relationship with other created beings. All of God's instructions concern one or the other of these relationships. This can be seen in the most succinct summary of the Old Testament law of God, the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:1–17). The Lord gave them to Moses on two stone tablets, which can be divided into relating properly to God (commandments 1–4) and relating properly to humanity (commandments 5–10). Jesus himself summed up the heart of God's instructions the same way, saying that the first and second greatest commandments are to love God and love others (Matt. 22:36–40).

So we must begin thinking about the law or torah as a genre that comes to us not negatively from the hand of an angry, distant God but as an invitation to full human flourishing through a relationship with him.

While this is an important starting point, it does not completely solve the biggest genre question regarding the law—that is, what role does the law continue to play in the Christian's life? Are the many instructions and commands we find in the Old Testament still binding on Christians who are part of a new covenant in Jesus Christ? This difficult issue has been debated since the earliest days of Christianity itself. Jesus addressed the question head-on in his famous Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). He said that he had not come to abolish the law, but neither were things remaining unchanged. He referred to this affirmation and transformation of the law as "fulfillment" (Matt. 5:17–19).

It is not possible here to fully explore what this Christian fulfillment of torah means. However, we can note one crucial observation

that affects our genre interpretation: torah instructions are tied to a particular covenant between God and Old Testament Israel. According to both the Old and New Testaments, however, Christians are not members of the same covenant that God made with Moses and the Israelites (see especially Gal. 3). The Old Testament looked forward to a time when God would make a new and deeper covenant with humanity (Jer. 31:31–34). On the night before his death, Jesus told his disciples that he was making this new covenant through himself (Luke 22:20).

This means that while the law/torah is still the inspired word of God—valuable as a witness to who he is and how he relates to his creation—Christians are not part of this particular covenant given through Moses (see the contrast in John 1:17–18). Therefore, Christians are not bound by the minutiae of the law, whether instructions for animal sacrifice, guidance for addressing mold in your house, or dietary regulations. Instead, according to the fundamental Christian understanding, Jesus has inaugurated a new covenant that includes his followers by means of their spiritual union with him. Through Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension, he has accomplished all that God requires of humans. Our covenant with God is now through Jesus Christ, and we follow "the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians obey the stipulations of this new covenant.

This adherence to the new covenant includes a backwards rereading of the entirety of God's instructions through the lens of who Jesus is and what he taught. In short, our reading of the Old Testament law must be attentive both to how God revealed himself originally and how the new covenant teachings enable us to reread this revelation through Christ. We do not neglect or abolish the teachings of the law, nor do we read them apart from their covenantal context.

The law must be re-understood through the Son Jesus (see 1 Cor. 10:1–13; 2 Cor. 1:20; Heb. 1:1–3). For an introduction to what can be a complicated topic, see Thomas R. Schreiner's helpful book *40 Questions about Christians and Biblical Law*.[12]

Poetry and Proverbs

Humans create not only stories and rules but also poetry and proverbs. Poetic writing uses words in concentrated and imaginative ways to express experiences and emotions. Proverbs likewise use creative imagery and pithy insights to communicate wisdom, guiding people to a flourishing life.

The Bible contains lots of poetry throughout, but the most condensed portion is found in the Psalter, the book of one hundred fifty Hebrew psalms or songs. Similarly, proverbial sayings are located in much of the Bible, but the book called Proverbs is the most compressed form of these sayings. Even though poetry and proverbs are different literary genres, we can treat them together because they share this distinctive: they communicate through images and wordplay not through direct propositional instruction. Psalms and proverbs are *indirect* theological communication.

Psalm writers explore and express their experiences and emotions. Thus, God's inspired word contains not only from-the-mountain instructions but also from-the-earth expressions. The psalms convey the records of people who are grieving, rejoicing, questioning, and wondering—full of fear and full of faith. Poetry is the highest form of human language, trafficking in concentrated and creative images, which is precisely what is needed to communicate the whole gamut of human experiences. But poetry is always indirect. Psalms are not heavy-handed instruction but inspired human expression that we get to overhear from the next room. Therefore, we must be careful not to

treat psalms as if they were primarily providing doctrinal teaching. This may happen in a secondary or inferred way. But if we treat poetry non-poetically we will miss its point and possibly over-interpret it. Psalms are meant to be vehicles for us to learn to express our own experiences of grief and praise. Our articulation is helped by other people of faith who have gone before us. Psalms are training wheels that teach us to ride the road of life, not instruction manuals on how to fix sprockets.

Similarly, we must recognize proverbial literature for what it is: generalized statements that communicate principles of wisdom. Wise principles are beneficial for guiding us in how to live *generally*. But life is messy and complex; thus no principle will apply in all situations. As it turns out, this is the essence of wise living—learning principles that provide guard rails for life but realizing that we must make wise decisions as unique situations arrive. Proverbs provide such general principles. They offer *neither* specific instructions that always apply *nor* covenantal promises from God. For example, in two verses right next to each other, Proverbs gives opposite instructions to be applied in different situations: "Answer not a fool according to his folly" (Prov. 26:4) and "Answer a fool according to his folly" (Prov. 26:5). Similarly, we must understand that a statement such as "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov 22:6) is a generalized principle but not a specific covenantal promise. Such is the wisdom of proverbial literature—it guides us without robotically specifying what we should do in every situation. This is in fact what the life of wisdom looks like.

Prophetic Writing

God is gracious and loving. Because of this, he wants to reveal himself to his creatures. He has done this through raising up spokespersons

who have declared his words. The Bible is simply the inscripturation, or writing down, of these revelations. Some of these speakers whom God has called are given the title "prophets." To modern ears, "prophecy" often connotes a message about the future. Indeed, the biblical prophets do sometimes predict and describe future events. But fundamentally, prophetic words are sermonic revelation more than prediction. They are calls from God to humanity about how to live now, not mere forecasts regarding the future. Scripture includes many prophetic messages, but they are most concentrated in what we call the Major and Minor Prophets in the Old Testament.[13]

Two key ideas help us interpret the genre of prophetic literature. The first idea overlaps with our discussion of poetry above. We may be surprised to learn that much of the prophetic writing is poetic in form—both in its structure and in its strong use of imagery. This does not mean that prophetic literature is indirect. It's often not, especially when God is rebuking injustice and corruption. But it does mean that, as with all poetry, an overly literal reading will often miss the point. The power of imaginative language is its aesthetic punch not its referentiality. That is, poetic prophecy makes a clear point by the use of a poignant image. We must concentrate on the intended message not the particular image. This is especially true when the prophets are envisioning the promised future. Descriptions of the future are often highly imaginative (though not imaginary)[14] and must be read as such.

The second key idea for interpreting the prophetic literature is the same matter we raised above regarding a Christian appropriation of the law. God's prophets were called to be covenant enforcement mediators. If they were true prophets, they were not speaking of their own accord, nor were they typically calling God's people to something new. Rather, they were rebuking their hearers for not

obeying their covenant relationship with God. Therefore, prophetic messages must be interpreted within the covenant in which they are delivered. Such messages will always reveal the heart of God, but the specifics of their instruction are contained within a covenant. Thus, from the perspective of the new covenant, when reading the Old Testament prophets we must take the same nuanced and two-sided approach that we do toward the law. The writings of the prophets are still abidingly meaningful and instructive as part of God's revelation, yet their specific instructions do not *necessarily* apply directly to us because of our different covenantal relationship with God.

TAKE A TURN AT THE WHEEL

Read Hosea 6.

Hosea is one of the twelve Minor Prophets whose words are gathered into the section of the Old Testament we call the Twelve (Hosea–Malachi). The best approach is to read Hosea in its entirety, but if you want to just dip in, you can read chapter 6.

What do these prophetic words reveal about who God is and what he cares about? What do these words tell us about ourselves—our tendencies of heart, our limits, our sinfulness?

Concentrate on Hosea 6:6. How does this verse get picked up and used in Jesus's ministry? Look at Matthew 9:1–13 and then Matthew 12:1–8. How does reading Hosea inform what is happening in Matthew 9 and 12? How do Matthew 9 and 12, in turn, help us understand Hosea?

Epistles (Letters)

As we noted above, the bulk of the Old Testament consists of narrative or stories explaining God's activity in the world. The remainder of the Old Testament writings apply, explore, and reinforce that story. So too with the New Testament. The four Gospels and Acts make up the vast majority of the New Testament, and they are primary in terms of explaining God's revelation in Jesus Christ. But the remainder of the New Testament is also important in extending our understanding and application of these truths. The interplay of the Old Testament prophets to the Old Testament narratives is analogous to the relationship of the New Testament Epistles (or Letters) to the Gospels and Acts. Both groups are important, but they approach the task from different starting points.[15]

To interpret the epistle genre well, we can note a few important practices. First, it is best to read an epistle as a whole whenever possible. Reading larger chunks of Scripture in any genre is always a good idea, but for epistles this is especially important. A letter is sent as a direct communication with a particular purpose in mind. One can easily take lines of epistolary instruction out of context. In the same way that a sentence in an email or text could be greatly misconstrued without reading the whole message, so too many times epistles are treated as a grab bag or celestial claw-machine game where the Christian snatches a verse that looks shiny and attractive and takes it home without considering the literary context. When reading epistles we should think in terms of paragraphs not verses or sentences. Epistles communicate their messages through sustained discourse, not in proverb-sized, disconnected nuggets. So read each epistle as a whole.

Second, we should remember that reading a New Testament letter is like listening to one side of a phone conversation. If we

know the person whose phone conversation we're hearing, we can probably make (mostly) good sense of what is being said. Nevertheless, there is always great potential to misunderstand. We might misconstrue the topic of the conversation, or we might not realize that there is unseen background to why the conversation is going the way it is. This means that we should always read epistles with humility, recognizing that we probably do not fully understand what is going on in the conversation. Even so, God is still gladly revealing himself to us through these historically situated letters (always remember 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

This latter observation relates to the third and most important insight. Epistles, much more than narratives, poetry, proverbs, or even the law, are *occasional* documents. This means that they are a type of literature written almost entirely in response to some specific occasion or situation the author needs to address. In this sense they are most like the Old Testament prophets. Of course, all literature is written from within and speaking to a particular culture because its human authors are situated in a particular time and place. But some writings are much more narrowly occasional than others. My list of errands to do today is more occasional than the book of classic poems sitting on my dining room table.

It is important to understand that this *occasional* nature of epistles does not in any way diminish their inspiration or authority; however, as a genre they need to be handled slightly differently. Specifically, when we interpret epistles, historical and cultural information will prove to be more significant to help us understand what is being said and how it applies to us. Because of their occasional nature, we need to understand more of the occasion at hand. Thankfully, we have at our disposal massive amounts of historical and cultural information in commentaries and reference

works that can enable us to discern what the authors of the New Testament letters are communicating.

This last point raises the biggest dilemma for good epistle interpretation: how much of their message is culturally defined and constrained? The particular context of the New Testament Epistles is first-century, Mediterranean Greco-Roman and Jewish culture. Inevitably, then, there are aspects that don't necessarily transfer and apply directly to modern Christian readers in different cultures. Most Christians today (at least in Western culture) do not "greet one another with a holy kiss" despite it being apparently commanded twice in the New Testament (Rom. 16:16; 2 Cor. 13:12). Nor do most contemporary female believers wear head coverings during church, despite a lengthy exposition regarding this in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Certainly some Christians do follow those commands while other faithful, Bible-believing Christians don't. The reason some Christians don't wear head coverings is that while they still recognize there is some principle to learn from the instruction, the specific form of application is culturally conditioned. God's word is to be obeyed, but it will not always look identical when the instructions are tied to particular, cultural habits. This doesn't make this literature less inspired or authoritative, but to read it well requires this cultural sensitivity.

The real difficulty becomes discerning which aspects of the instructions should be interpreted as culturally bound and which should not. For example, there is no small debate among evangelicals about whether Paul's instructions on the role of women in church (1 Tim. 2:11–12) fall into the same category as head coverings and holy kisses. These difficult interpretive decisions need to be handled and argued on a case-by-case basis; there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The key is a wise and humble wrestling that recognizes our need to be culturally sensitive interpreters while also acknowledging that we

can be easily tempted to write off some teachings in Scripture because they do not fit with our desires or habits.

Parables

One of the most well-known things about Jesus's ministry is that he loved to teach in parables. Depending on how exactly we define a parable, approximately 35 percent of his teaching comes to us in this form. Biblical parables include allegorical stories, poetic images, similes, and metaphors. Jesus's teachings were memorable not only because they were often shocking and unexpected, but also because they used accessible analogies from agriculture, the marketplace, and real-life relationships.

Jesus wasn't the first person to teach with parables. There are parables scattered throughout the Old Testament, such as when the prophet Ezekiel described the Babylonian exile as a full-plumage eagle that snapped off the top of a cedar tree and planted it in a different city (Ezek. 17:2–10). Nathan the prophet used a parable to indict King David for his sins of seducing Bathsheba and killing her husband (2 Sam. 12:1–13). Teaching in parables is the purview of prophets and sages, two key roles that Jesus also played.

There is no "Book of Parables" in the Old Testament or New Testament. Most of the parables occur in collections peppered throughout the Gospels. Because they function in a special way, it is worth making a few comments about interpreting the genre of parables.

Our term *parable* refers to a wide range of forms of speech in Hebrew and Greek cultures including riddles, stories, pithy sayings, and allegories. Parables come in many shapes and sizes, and at times they function like narratives, like poems, like proverbs, and like apocalyptic literature. *Parable* is really a general term we use to describe a range of ways of speaking that all use analogy. Parables

can be lengthy allegorical stories such as the parable of the sower, or they can be simple, pithy aphorisms such as "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field" (Matt. 13:44). The consistent element is that they all use some comparison or analogy.

As a result, the best practice for interpreting parables well is to pay attention to how the analogy is working. *What is the point of comparison and what seems to be the point being made by the comparison?* Sometimes there will be a summary statement such as "So the last will be first, and the first last" (Matt. 20:16) or "Thus he declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19), making our job a bit easier. But whether or not such a statement is present, we should think in terms of how the comparison is working and not focus on minor details that are unrelated to the comparison.

For example, in Jesus's parable about the pearl of great price, a man sells everything he has to buy one great pearl (Matt. 13:45–46). Speculation about the price fluctuation of pearl prices in first-century Judaism is not going to serve the interpreter well. Nor will it be helpful to ponder what the man plans to do with this big pearl once he gets it. The point of the parable hinges on the analogy that it is worth selling lesser things to gain something of greater value. Jesus is clearly teaching that the kingdom of God is of greater value than anything else to us and that we should be willing to give up all else to obtain it.

Another important interpretive principle is paying attention to the literary context in which the parables are set. Parables by their nature are somewhat flexible in their meaning; they are "open" poetic texts that can communicate more than one idea, even as stories regularly do. As a result, we often discern a parable's specific application by paying attention to how the writer has set the parable in the flow of other teachings and sayings.

For example, the notoriously difficult parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16) makes best sense when we look at the surrounding stories. This parable is a response to the disciples' question about their own future rewards from God relative to the future state of the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16–30). The literary context around this parable shows us that the disciples, just like us, tended to compare themselves to one another (see also their spat about who will be greatest in the kingdom in 20:20–28). The parable challenges the disciples to see that God is free to do what he wants and to bless as he sees fit. The call to the disciples from the parable is that they must cease the comparison game with one another and recognize God for his great generosity.

TAKE A TURN AT THE WHEEL

Read Luke 15:1–32.

You're probably familiar with the third story in this series of parables, what we typically call the parable of the prodigal son. But notice that in Luke 15 Jesus gives us three related parables that build on one another.

What repeated patterns are there in these parables? What differences are there? What analogies are being made? Who do the different characters represent in the real world? Did you notice the addition in the third parable? We not only have a son who was lost and then found but also another son who never left and is now mad. What is the significance of this?

Apocalyptic Visions

The final genre to discuss is apocalyptic literature. The book of Revelation is the most famous example of apocalyptic in Scripture, but this genre also makes an appearance in significant portions of the Old Testament prophetic literature (e.g., Ezek. 38–39; Dan. 7–12) as well as in the Olivet Discourse in the Gospels (Mark 13 and parallels).

As with some of the other examples, apocalyptic actually contains a mixture of other genres. Apocalyptic literature typically employs poetic imagery and phrasing, may have narrative and epistolary portions, and regularly functions like a prophetic word of both warning and future hope. As a result, we must be sensitive and deft when reading apocalyptic literature, employing the skills and insights that apply to several other genres discussed above.

Answering two important questions is essential to interpreting apocalyptic well: Why is it written? How does it work? First, apocalyptic literature is typically written by a persecuted group in society that is seeking to encourage one another with the hope of a different future. This is true for everything from religious cults to nineteenth-century African slaves whose songs reflect an apocalyptic way of using language to conceal and to give hope. Jewish and Christian people in the Bible who experienced isolation and persecution used this genre as an important way to express their hope in God's coming kingdom. The persecution context and the future-hope focus explain why the style is typically image-heavy and poetic. Apocalyptic images function as indirect communication that speaks powerfully to insiders while concealing the content of the hope to the outsiders—the persecutors. Identity among a group of people is powerfully cultivated through a shared, image-laden language.

This understanding of the *why* leads us to understand the *how* of apocalyptic. This literature is written not so that the reader can decipher precisely what every poetic image means but rather so that we might be challenged and encouraged to diligence and perseverance as we await God's full redemption. Apocalyptic literature is not to be read with a newspaper in hand so that we can figure out exactly whom Daniel or John identifies as the antichrist. Instead, the images are meant to inspire and affirm our longing for the time when God will set the world to right. Apocalyptic literature is not a secret code to be cracked but a memorable vision meant to build up hope by reminding us that God is in control of history and is actively at work bringing about his beautiful redemption.

Leg Stretch

This has been a long stretch of road, and we've covered a lot of miles. Ingrid has given us much help on the second skill needed to become good informational readers: understanding different literary genres. Let's pause for a moment, stretch our mental legs, and look back over the road we've just traversed. This discussion is important because when we read the Bible without sensitivity to the ways in which different genres communicate, there is the potential for misunderstanding what God is saying to us. Being aware of this hazard should not drive us to anxiety or paralysis in reading the Bible. God is happy to speak to us, and he *does* speak to us in and through our very imperfect understanding and interpretation. Nevertheless, our goal should always be to grow toward reaching the deepest, wisest, and most beneficial reading. And being sensitive to literary genres is one help along this journey. We can flip this around and say it more positively: when we can identify genre in our reading, we know what part of the Bible's library we're

standing in, and we can more fully enjoy what each part of the Bible intends to communicate.

YOU ARE HERE

The First Stage: Informational Reading with Ingrid

- Reading through Three Avenues
- Side Trip 1: Maps and Seeing
- Understanding Different Literary Genres
- **Side Trip 2: Reading in St. Petersburg (and Other Places)**
- Avoiding Common Interpretive Mistakes

Side Trip 2: Reading in St. Petersburg (and Other Places)

New Testament scholar Mark Allan Powell tells the story of a fascinating experiment he did in St. Petersburg, Russia.[16] The story actually begins in the United States when he was teaching the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Powell did an exercise with his students that I do with mine now as well (and I recommend you try for yourself). He had them read this parable, recount it from memory, and then check to see what they missed. When he did this with his US students, only a very small percentage (about six percent) recalled Luke 15:14 with its reference to "a severe famine" afflicting the land where the wayward son was living. When he did the same exercise in St. Petersburg, however, he found that nearly all of the Russian students (eighty-four percent) included this detail in their recounting of the story.

Yet this was only part of what Powell found. He also discovered that the American and Russian students had rather different interpretations

of what was going on in the story overall. The American students tended to see the prodigal son's problem as his foolish squandering of his wealth. The Russians, by contrast, interpreted the problem as the son's foolish desire to be independent of his family, to be self-sufficient, which became acutely problematic through the famine.

Powell insightfully notes that these different tendencies of interpretation are based on the distinct cultural and historical situations of the two groups of students. The Americans' interpretation reflects values common in a capitalistic society where individuals are seen as reaping what they sow with their lives for good or for bad. The Russians' interpretation likewise reflects their own more socialist and communal sensibilities, seeing the son break those conventions to his harm. Additionally, Powell surmises that the devastating siege of Leningrad (the name of St. Petersburg from 1924–91) during WWII was still remembered by the grandparents and great-grandparents of these students. Starvation and famine were a real part of the cultural memory of the Russians in a way not conceivable by the Americans.

So how does this help us become better readers of Scripture? These different interpretations of the parable are not completely contradictory and are not in competition with each other. The main ideas of the parable—that the father welcomes the wayward son and that the older brother is angry—are grasped by both groups of students. At the same time, both groups, situated in their own cultural contexts, provide certain insights into how best to read the story and feel its nuances.

Ingrid rightly emphasizes understanding the historical culture of the Bible to enable us to read Scripture well. This example shows us that we also need to be aware of our *own* history and culture when interpreting texts. We bring assumptions, prejudices, insights, and blind spots to our reading. The best interpretations will come as

we grow in cultural awareness of both the Bible and of our own place and time.

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- **Avoiding Common Interpretive Mistakes**

Avoiding Common Interpretive Mistakes

It's nice on a road trip if one of your party has some general familiarity with where you're going. An adventure on the open road is great fun, but missing a major turn or hitting a pothole that results in a flat tire is not. We've now reached the third and final portion of the trip where Ingrid is behind the wheel. For our third informational skill we want to learn how to avoid some common interpretive mistakes. The point of this skill is not to rob us of the joy of the journey but rather to protect us from wrong turns and unnecessary repairs that will slow us down.

Because we care about hearing God's voice from the Bible (not making it mean whatever we want it to), we should take care to practice interpretation in the best way. Good *informational* reading is *careful*, giving focused attention and our best intellectual capacities to the task of understanding. There are common mistakes in interpretation that are easy to make and easy to correct. These

mistakes can be organized under two headings: language errors and reasoning errors.[17]

Language Errors

God is a speaking God, and the Bible is a book of words. While there are other ways and experiences by which we may get glimpses of God—such as emotions, beauty in art and nature, mysterious and spiritual experiences—no form of revelation is more central than the words of Scripture.

But because we are limited and sinful creatures living in a fallen world, we will regularly encounter misunderstandings in communication. Sometimes we can easily misunderstand a good friend. If talking face to face to someone with whom we have much in common can result in misunderstanding, how much more challenging is it to read and understand a text written by someone from a different language, culture, place, and time? This may be especially true when we study the Bible because we try so hard to derive deeper meaning from it. Ironically, this expectation and respect for the Bible can lead us to treat its words in a magical way that results in more confusion than clarity, more error than truth.

For example, when studying Scripture we sometimes put too much emphasis on what a particular word *really* means by focusing on its origin and history—that is, its etymology—or on how we use the word in more technical contexts. Take the word *butterfly*, for example. Any speaker of English knows that, despite its constituent parts, this noun does not refer to a stick of churned milk soaring through the sky. *Butterfly* is an agreed upon set of sounds that points to a commonly known family of insects. We don't determine the meaning of the word through a dissection of its parts—*butter* and *fly*. Yet this kind of mistake is often foisted on

words in the Bible. For example, the common Greek word *ekballō* comes from the preposition *ek* ("out of") and the verb *ballō* (often meaning "to throw"). Sometimes this word is used to mean to "cast or throw [something] out," like a group of demons in Matthew 8:31. But the same word can also be used with a less etymologically derived meaning of "bring out" such as in Matthew 12:35 where the good man and the bad man both "bring out" treasures good and bad—not "throw them out."

Similarly, we should always be careful to let the meaning of a word be determined by its use in its own context rather than assuming that the same word means the same thing everywhere. For example, the important biblical words for "righteous/righteousness" (Hebrew: *tsedaqah*; Greek: *dikaiosunē*) are rich and varied in meaning and usage. "Righteousness" in the Old Testament means primarily doing what is right according to God's commands, and this is its usage in the Gospel of Matthew as well. In Paul's writings it has slightly different but related senses of being declared in a right standing and of God's bringing justice or righteousness to the world. Matthew's use of "righteous" focuses more on the virtuous way of living that accords with God's coming kingdom than on a sense of things being put right in the world and with us. Matthew's and Paul's meanings are not contradictory, but neither are they the same. We will create a lot of confusion for ourselves and for others if we assume that *dikaiosunē* necessarily means exactly the same thing when different authors use it.

Many other examples of language errors could be identified, but we can sum up the point by emphasizing our need to pay close attention to what is communicated in Scripture and to use good *common sense*. We can avoid many language errors when we take care not to be overly technical in our arguments while

at the same time not making too many assumptions about what an author is saying.

Reasoning Errors

Not only can we easily make mistakes with language but we also commonly commit errors in our logical reasoning. The effect of sin on our minds (see Rom. 1) means that logical arguments or patterns of reasoning can often appear sound when they are, in fact, not.

For example, consider the following argument:

All cats are hairy.
Rover the dog is hairy.
Therefore, Rover the dog is a cat.

While the absurd conclusion makes us realize that the argument is false, it may not be immediately clear to us *why* the argument is not only untrue but also poorly argued. This argument is invalid because although the first two statements are true, the relationship between them is not logically binding. That is, the assertion of the universal hairiness of cats does not mean that other animals, such as dogs, cannot also be hairy. Therefore, since the first statement does not necessarily relate to the second statement, the conclusion is invalid.

We often do the same thing when we are trying to understand a theological truth in a biblical passage. We often don't realize that our argument is following the same kind of illogical reasoning. In the case above we have a classic logical fallacy of association, whereby the combination of the first and second premises create a false sense of necessity in the conclusion. We can make the same error when interpreting the Bible. For example, consider the following reasoning:

The disciples in the Bible cast out demons.
We are also disciples.
Therefore, we cast out demons.

This argument may seem sound, but it fails in the same way as the argument above. I'm not saying that later Christians have not cast out demons (I am sure they have); nevertheless, the conclusion does not derive from the premises. Just because disciples in the Bible cast out demons and Christians today are also disciples, it does not logically follow that every disciple today casts out demons. This *could* happen, but it is not logically necessary because other factors may be at play—such as the unique status of Jesus's original disciples, special times when the gospel is advancing and is accompanied by miracles (as in Acts), and the fact that different people have different spiritual gifts (see 1 Cor. 12:4–11, 27–31).

In our study of the Bible we often commit these kinds of reasoning errors, especially when we want to assert something that we think is true and good. Such ways of arguing may win the day but will always prove to be foolish and damaging in the long run.

This warning to avoid common interpretive mistakes is an invitation to be *careful* in our arguments about what Holy Scripture is saying. As a result of our human limitations and the effects of sin, we do often make language and reasoning mistakes, so we should be humble and thoughtful in the task of interpreting the Bible.