LESSON 5 & 6

Reading as Observation: Level 1 - Flyover

With a good Bible in hand, we can begin our reading. As indicated in Lessons 2&3, our beginning approach is to understand the Bible at the level of the individual books that make up the entire Bible. In doing so, our first task is not to jump to conclusions about the meaning or an interpretation, but simply to observe what is going on in the text. The next three lessons will explore different 'levels' of observation that are important in determining what the text actually says. After all, it is necessary to be certain about what the text *says* before we can say what it *means*.

A FLYOVER VIEW

"Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your Law." (Psalm 119:18). As a skill, observation is about training your eyes and mind to see things you don't normally notice. One of the things that is true for many people when it comes to reading the bible (especially those that are raised going to church and Bible classes every Sunday!) is that they, according to the old saying, 'lose the forest for the trees.' That means that we often get blinded into thinking a verse is saying one thing, when it may be saying something more. Or we get wrapped up in understanding the application of one single verse, or even a single word, so that we lose sight of the meaning of the whole. These are our biases creeping into our reading.

To avoid that kind of error, we propose here that the best first step in bible study is to take a flyover, or bird's eye view, of the text. Before we examine individual verses or even chapters of a book we should read the book in its entirety first. Shorter books can be done in one sitting. Longer books like Isaiah or Luke may take multiple days to read through.

This kind of reading is the way many of the books of Scripture were intended to be read. For instance, when Paul wrote the Philippian letter, he surely expected the church to have the letter read all the way through in the assembly. Could you imagine it being read like we sometimes do in our bible classes, one sentence at a time and then after each one someone asking, "Now what do you think Paul meant by that?" That kind of method would be frustrating and absurd. When we first approach a text, we should first consider it as a whole unit.

UNDERSTANDING THE GENRE OF SCRIPTURE

A word we have already used in this class is 'context.' Becoming better readers necessitates that we understand the context in which the text is written. All texts have a context. A

context is a network of connected factors and circumstances that provide the background through which we understand the text itself. These factors and circumstances are many and various. Some of them may require a higher level of knowledge and expertise, and may require outside study tools to provide relevant information. But to start in our flyover view of the text, we will focus on the *literary* context. By this, we primarily mean the *genre* of the text we read. *All meaning is genre-dependent*, because genre answers the most fundamental question in the practice of reading and study: 'What am I reading?' Without a firm grasp on the answer to that question, the reader is open to misinterpretation of the entire text.

As we have seen, the Bible contains primarily three types of writing: Narrative, Poetry & Discourse. In some respect, those are broad categories of genre. But in this discussion, we will look at these and a few related genres which are specific to the biblical writings. The variety of the biblical writings is manifested in the number of literary genres it contains. A few of the larger genre categories in the Bible include:

- Narrative – ex. Genesis, 1-2 Kings, Jonah, Acts; this is the literary genre that we are probably most familiar with. This is 'story-telling,' which includes features like narration, character, setting, conflict and resolution (or 'plot'). As with most stories, the point of these narratives is not just to record events, but to teach a lesson through the re-telling of the events. Biblical authors convey meaning in narratives by presenting their version of the stories with the details that are significant (both historically and symbolically) to the divine message that the author wants to convey through the story. As individual events are re-told alongside other events, a biblical author forms a large-scale story to show readers something about God, the world, humanity, or their relationships to each other.
- Gospels – ex. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; the gospels are a particular type of narrative within Scripture. In one respect, these have all the hallmarks of narratives; but these go a bit deeper by focusing around the life and death of a single individual, in each case Jesus of Nazareth. These are thus what we might call biographies. They aren't the same as modern biographies which might attempt a full reconstruction of an individual's life, but they do describe Jesus' work and persona in terms of why he is important. And while the Gospel writers accomplish this in different ways, with different stories about Jesus, they all conclude that he is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, and known to be God in the flesh through his death and resurrection. But even more critical, they are presenting Jesus' life as a means of persuading the reader to believe in Jesus' accomplishment and join his cause for the salvation of the world – in other words, the Gospels tell 'The Gospel.'
- Parable – ex. 2 Samuel 12, Isaiah 5, Jesus teachings in the Gospels; Many places in the Bible use parables, but the most prominent are those of Jesus who seems to have used them frequently in his regular teaching. Parables are stories meant to conceal the truth in the guise of a simple, earthy tale. And while some of Jesus parables are given explanations by the Gospel writers, for the original hearers parables function like riddles, meant to provoke the imagination to understand what such a strange story might mean for the coming of God's Kingdom. Even where those explanations are given, they are often surprising or further confounding. Ultimately, discerning the parables comes down to making a decision to follow Jesus, or denying him and thus choosing not to understand their meaning and power.

- Poetry – ex. 'Song of Moses,' Psalms, Job, Hosea, Joel; this genre is most prevalent in Scripture in the specific form of Hebrew poetry. Like our modern notions of poetry, Hebrew poetry also includes features like parallelism, wordplay, and poetic imagery. But they don't contain rhyme or meter like most of our more famous poems. At a technical level, Hebrew poetry mostly functions as couplets, wherein a line is constructed to make a statement, only to be completed, deepened, or countered by the next line. This allows authors of poetry to say things in ways which force a reader to grapple with the connections between ideas, and to think through the deep truths being described, thus expanding their knowledge of God. Poetry is employed by Old Testament writers for many reasons, including as an interlude within narratives, as the 'lyrics' of Jewish song, and for recording the speech of God. In fact, when counting the frequent use of poetry among the prophets, the majority of God's speech in the Bible is in poetic form. While there are no extended examples of poetry in the New Testament, there are some short examples where the language suggests that poetry or song is being cited – for example, Philippians 2:5-11 or 1 Timothy 3:16.
- Wisdom Literature – ex. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes; Wisdom Literature consists of practical, spiritually motivated, advice which is meant to convict a person toward knowing God. But rather than accomplishing this through extended discourse to try to persuade a person through argumentation, the biblical writers expressed God's truths in this regard as poetry. Wisdom Literature is actually a subset of biblical poetry, since all of it is in written in poetic form. Much biblical wisdom of this type is practical, outlining the principles for a good life in God's sight. Other wisdom tries to tackle the big philosophical questions such as the meaning of life or the cause of suffering.
- Prophecy – ex. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Malachi; Often misunderstood, prophecy is not simply 'making predictions' like a fortune teller, but 'forth-telling' of the future based upon divinely-inspired insight into religious and/or political current events in the prophets own time. Prophets often have unique encounters with God to commission them to speak His word to Israel. These 'prophecies' – typically expressed as spoken poetic oracles, but sometimes as symbolic actions – accused Israelite nation(s) of breaking their covenant with God, and called the people to repentance or face God's coming judgment. For this reason, prophets were mostly marginalized in their own time, but their words became respected once these forecasts of God's wrath actually came true when Israel went into exile. Fortunately, many of Israelites prophets also gave assurances of a future salvation beyond judgment, in an act of God to redeem and restore his people. These were the very promises to which the early followers of Jesus latched on to in explaining Jesus' identity and accomplishments.
- Apocalyptic – ex. Daniel, Revelation; Apocalyptic is a unique genre which tends to break all of our modern categories for writing style. These writings claim to be the revelation of divine secrets, usually in the form of a vision, dream, or angelic visitation. They are categorized by grandiose esoteric symbolism of cosmic destruction – but where many people might misunderstand this as predictions of the end of the world, that isn't really the point of the highly symbolic language of apocalyptic writing. Rather, this highly stylized speech and writing is meant to attribute spiritual significance to current events. It does this because it makes a worldview assumption that heavenly and demonic forces which we cannot see stand behind the actions that we can see in our world, and so apocalyptic often describes a religious or political activity as an act of God (or Christ) or an act of Satan. Another telling feature of formal apocalyptic writing is that it conveys the moral superiority of an oppressed people. Apocalyptic is always written from the perspective of the person

who is suffering at the hands of some larger power. As a result, the highly evocative language is an expression of feelings of suffering, longing and hope which are meant to be shared by the reader.

- Law – ex. Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy; a significant portion of the Pentateuch is written as God law's for the people of Israel. But far from just being a kind of arbitrary code of things God likes and doesn't, these laws are set in the larger context of God's covenant with Israel, constituting them as his representative people to the rest of humanity. Thus, the laws are themselves Israel's terms of the covenant to be God's chosen nation. These laws are generally of two kinds. On one hand, many of the laws included in the covenant are ancient ritual symbols to reflect the holiness of the people. At the heart of this were the rituals for the regular sacrifices to symbolize purity and atonement for the people. On the other hand, many laws speak to how Israel should enact both mercy and judgement to reflect the character of their God.
- Epistle – ex. Romans, Philemon, 1 John; Epistles, or letters, are written correspondence from one party (usually one of the Twelve Apostles, but not always) to another, characterized by formal greeting and conclusion, and personal information or request. Many of the letters are also attempts to persuade the audience of a stated idea or set of ideas, and so letters may contain logical argumentation about an aspect of Gospel teaching, or appeals to common interests in Christ. All of the letters collected as part of Scripture are – directly or indirectly – written to a local church community, and were expected to be read aloud to the congregation, presumably within their meetings for worshipping God. Many times the letter would be read and explained by the recipient who carried the letter to its destination (the Post Office did not exist in the ancient Greco-Roman world!), and sometimes this would entail a kind of rhetorical 'performance' of the letter on behalf of the author. Thus these letters often work as speeches as much as letters. Most, if not all, were written for a specific purpose – to address some pressing need or circumstance within the church which needed to be resolved. This resolution was always a calling for God's new people in Christ to maintain their characteristic unity and holiness in the face of people (either the pagan world outside, or false teachers inside) who were ignorant or contemptuous of Christians.

Of course, all of these categories, have their own nuances and what we might call 'sub-genres.' In addition, one particular book of the Bible might encompass multiple genres, so there is some overlap here. But these basic kinds of writing can help set in our mind how to approach the text we will read. As you read within each genre-type, you will become more familiar with the way that the language works so as to better understand the meaning of the text.

FLYOVER CONSIDERATIONS

When reading through a book for the first time, its always best to 'feel out' what you'll be reading. At the beginning it is often helpful to notice how many chapters a book has to understand the scope of the writing. You might read the first 1-2 paragraphs and the last 1-2 paragraphs to get a sense of where the book starts and ends. You may even peruse section headings in your Bible to get a sense of what is involved, keeping in mind those are added by the publisher.

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

Once you start reading the book in full, you may need to resist the temptation to stop and re-read through something you don't immediately understand. Inevitably, this will happen from time to time, but try your best to keep moving all the way through. As you read through, consider the following high-level points. At the end of your reading you should be able answer these questions:

- *Who is the author?* Think about not just the name of the person who writes the book, but why that person is important – Is that person involved in the action, or an independent narrator? Are they an authority figure, or are they anonymous? Also, note that 'authorship' doesn't always take the form of composing a text; rather sometimes, as is the case with the Gospels, the majority of the task of putting together a text is compiling, editing, and organizing pre-existent material.
- *Who is the audience?* Who the book is written to may offer clues to the purpose of the book – Is it written to a specific individual, or a group? What do you know about their identity or circumstances? Can it be deduced from the content of the text? Or is the audience more general and abstract?
- *What are the intentions of the author?* Along with identifying the genre, this is the most revealing question you can ask of a book. Another way of asking is 'Why does the author write this book?' or more pointedly 'What is at stake for the author in writing this book?' This can be a complex question, and borders on making an interpretive judgment, but having a least a basic idea at this point in your observations is a good step.
- *What is a synopsis of the message?* This question is about being able to boil down the entire book into 2-3 summary sentences. If you can do this, this summary will serve as an anchor-point for reading all of the smaller sections and individual verses in the book.

In addition to these questions, do not be afraid to write down other questions you have. One of the best study habits you can implement is to write down your questions alongside your conclusions. These also set you up for better understanding as you work through Scripture.

CLASS ACTIVITY (B)

A. Choose one book of the Bible that you can read all the way through before our next class. Preferably, this is a book you have not studied before (or at least in a long while). After reading through in as few sittings as possible, attempt to answer the following, and be prepared to share with the class:
    a. What is the genre of this book? How did that affect the way you read the book?
    b. Who is the author?
    c. Who is the audience for whom (or to whom) the book is written?
    d. Why does the author write this book? Do the identities of the author and/or the audience have any impact on how you answer?
    e. How would you summarize the entire book in 2 or 3 sentences?
    f. What are some remaining questions you have about this book?