

How to Read Narrative

Alright, great to be with you guys this morning. If you have a bible, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 10—we'll get there here in just a bit. If this is your first time with us on a Sunday, welcome. We've had a lot of new faces coming around recently and we absolutely love that. So thanks for being here, and just to catch you up, we're halfway through a teaching series all about the bible. Two weeks ago, we talked about *what the bible is*. Last week, Eric followed that up by talking about what the bible is *for*: what is this book meant to *accomplish* when we read it? So today, now that we've covered how to *think* about the bible, we are moving into the big question most of us are asking, which is *how do we actually read it?* **Today we are going to actually begin learning together how to read the bible and let it do what it was intended to do.**

Now, if you've been around church very long, you've probably come across one or two or twenty different *methods* for reading the bible. Often, for some reason, they come in the form of acronyms. Christians love them some acronyms. So there's the S.O.A.P. method, which stands for *scripture, observation, application, prayer*. There's the G.R.O.W. method, which stands for *greet, read, observe, write*. There's the P.O.W.E.R. method, which stands for *prayer, observe, write, envision, response*. There's the F.U.N.K. method, which stands for *feel, understand, notice, and know*. See there are so many methods out there out there, and they are all so cheesy, that I completely made up that last one and none of you even flinched at it. But I could go on—there are so many different methods out there for reading and studying the bible.

And here's the thing: I think some of them are *great* methods. But something I've noticed is that **when it comes to these methods**, a lot of them seem too *specific*: they work really well for some parts of the bible, but don't really work well at all for others. For example, one bible reading method I actually like a lot says to ask the question "what does this passage *demand* of me?" Which makes a lot of sense if we're talking about *teaching or instructional* passage in the bible; those types of passages usually *do demand* something of us, right? But what about *narrative* passages? Like last week, in the reading plan, a lot of us read Genesis 23 where Abraham essentially haggles with the Hittites about a place to bury his wife after she dies. They want to give him a burial site for free, but he insists over and over again on paying for it. They go back and forth about it several times, and then the story just ends. So let *me* ask *you*: what does that passage *demand* of us? That we insist on paying full price for burial sites? I don't think *that's* the point. So as good as it is to ask that question of *some parts* of the bible, it

doesn't really make *sense* to ask it of others. So that *method* might work really well for *some* parts of the bible, but not for others.

And **one reason** that some of these methods don't work great for studying whole bible is because, as we've already mentioned in this series, the Bible is made up of a lot of different *genres* of literature. **It's because different parts of the bible are actually meant to be read in different ways.** If you remember two weeks ago, we said that *big picture*, the bible is made up of these three different primary types of literature:

- *Narrative* (44% of the bible) is the type of literature that simply recounts things that happened. Examples would be books like Genesis, the first half or so of Exodus, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, the book of Acts in the New Testament, among others.
- *Poetry* (33% of the bible) is an artistic form of writing that appeals to the imagination to describe an experience. Examples of poetry would be books like the Psalms, Song of Solomon large portions of most *prophetic* books like Isaiah and Jeremiah, to name just a few.
- *Discourse* is writing that seeks to communicate concepts or instructions or ideas *directly*. Examples of discourse would be books like Leviticus, most of Deuteronomy, the portions of the gospels where Jesus is *teaching* something, and pretty much all of the New Testament letters.

And then you obviously have a lot of books in the bible that contain multiple of these genres in the same book. But **because the bible is made up of these three very different types of literature, it would make sense that some of the methods that work really well for some parts of the bible, wouldn't work great for other parts of it.** We don't read an ancient love poem in Song of Solomon between a husband and wife the same way that we read a historical account of the early church like the book of Acts. They are written for very different purposes and deserve to be read in very different ways.

So in light of that, here's what we're going to do **for the next three weeks. We are going to take one of those three types of literature each week and talk in detail about how to read it.** Each type of literature will have its *own* set of questions to ask as you're reading it. And as we do that, we want to be as practical and helpful as possible. So each of these weeks will be part *teaching*, and part *lab*. In other words, we will spend the first 10-15 minutes of the teaching *talking about* how to study that genre, and then we'll spend the rest of the teaching actually *doing it*: actually walking through a couple different passages in the bible and asking and answering the questions we give you. So

the goal in all of this is that when you walk out each week, you will feel like you have at least a decent grasp on how to read and study those types of passages in the bible. Does that make sense?

So *today*, we're going to talk about how to read the genre of literature that makes up the *largest* portion of the bible out of the three, and that's biblical *narrative*. Narrative, as a reminder, is any part of the bible that is simply explaining to us what happened at some point in history. **If it is telling a story or recalling events that occurred, it is considered *narrative*.** So let's get started by looking at how the apostle *Paul* tells us we should read narrative in 1 Corinthians 10. Here, he has in mind specifically *Old Testament* narrative, but I think it is also helpful for understanding *all* narrative in the bible—Old Testament *and* New. Look with me at 1 Corinthians 10, starting in v. 6:

[6] Now ***these things*** [in context, "these things" refers to the narratives we find in the Old Testament]— (*these things*) **took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.**

So according to Paul here, one of the purposes in us reading narratives in the bible is that we might see them as *negative examples*: that we might learn what *not* to do, how *not* to live. So in a backwards way, they actually are teaching us something, they're just doing it by process of elimination. So narratives in the bible are trying to tell you how to live kind of like how the movie *Christmas Vacation* is trying to show you how to have a good Christmas vacation. It's teaching you by *negative* example. Keep reading—Paul is going to give us some specific examples of what he means, v. 7:

[7] Do not be ***idolaters*** as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." [8] We must not indulge in ***sexual immorality*** as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. [9] We must not **put Christ to the test**, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, [10] nor ***grumble***, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. [And make sure you pay attention to this next part...] [11] Now these things happened to ***them*** as an example, but ***they were written down for our instruction***, on whom the end of the ages has come.

So all these things we read in the narrative portions of the bible, they were written down for our *instruction*, Paul says. Put another way, **they are there so that we might take note of how those people lived, how God interacted with them as a result, and**

from that might gain *instruction* on how we should live instead. That's the *purpose* of narrative portions of the bible. Make sense so far?

So knowing that, let's take what Paul just said about narrative, and translate it into a set of questions we can ask whenever we come across narrative passages in the bible. I'll go through them pretty quickly at first, and then we'll go back and see how they work exactly. If you like taking notes, you may want to jot these down:

- **What is *happening* in this passage?** Before you can get anywhere with a narrative passage of Scripture, you have to be able to wrap your mind around what happened in it. It can be a sentence or two, or maybe it takes a little more than that, but attempt to summarize what happened in the story.
- **Where does this narrative *fit* in the *larger story* of Scripture?** As we mentioned a couple of weeks ago, we have to always remember that what we're reading is one unified story. Meaning, you can't just pluck a narrative passage out of its place in the story and expect to understand all that it is saying. You've got to ask, "where are we in the bigger story?" What happened before this passage, and after it? What part of the story are we in?
- **What does this passage tell us about the nature and character of God?** Before it's a story about anything else, Scripture is first a story about God. So we need to figure out what the narrative shows us about who God is and what he's like. What are his God's actions in the story, and what do those actions tell us about who he is?
- **What does this passage tell us about the nature and tendencies of humanity?** Next, what do the people in the passage do that reflects a pattern of humanity in general? Maybe it's not something that every single human being always does, but is there at least something in the passage that exemplifies a tendency you've seen in yourself or others? In what ways do the people in the story sin, miss the point, fail to rely on or acknowledge God? And lastly...
- **How does this passage point us to the person and work of Jesus?** Lastly, how does this passage help us see Jesus? How does it set up a problem that only Jesus can solve? How does it present a particular sin for which only Jesus is the answer? How does it depict a flawed picture of humanity that Jesus came to set right? Lastly, we want to know how this passage points us to Jesus. (As a bonus tip on this one, if you're struggling to answer it, try using the answers to the two questions before this one. Generally speaking, if you know what the story shows us about the nature and character of God, and what it shows us about the nature

and tendency of humanity, that usually sets you up pretty well to see how it points to Jesus).

Alright, so now that we have our questions, let's learn how to use them. Are you guys ready? You don't look ready, but I'll assume all your excitement is on the inside. For starters, let's use these questions to help us read a story some of you might've heard of before: a story about a guy named Gideon. Turn with me to Judges 6.

Judges 6:36-40

If you're newer to the bible, feel free to stop by the table of contents, or just use one of our bibles and the page number will be up on the screen. While you're getting there, a little background on the story. Gideon was a prophet, and also one of the so-called "judges" of Israel, which was basically a type of military leader or commander. And here in Judges 6, we're going to read a story about an interaction that Gideon has with God, right before a major military battle. So let's read through the story, starting in v. 36:

[36] Then Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said [if you really are going to do what you said you would God], [37] behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said." [In other words, "if I'm going to trust you God, I need a sign." So he did it, v. 38... [38] *And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water [God did exactly as he asked]. [39] Then Gideon said to God, "Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. [This time, Gideon says,] Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew."* [In other words, "do the same thing you did already, but in reverse.] [40] *And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.*

There's our story. So, first up, **what is happening in this passage?**

Probably the easiest way of summarizing *this one* is that Gideon asks God for two specific "signs", and God gives them to him. Right? He asks him for proof, or confirmation that God will be with him in this next military battle. God does that, and then he asks for the same sign, but in reverse. And he says if God does these things, performs these signs, he'll *know* that God is with him. And God actually does it, both times. That's what happens in the story. Next...

Where does this narrative *fit* in the larger story of Scripture?

So I'll go ahead and tell you up front: *this* question is *massively* important for understanding this passage. Because in the chapter leading up to this passage, what we notice is that Gideon actually has a *trust problem* when it comes to his relationship with God. Namely, the problem is that he *doesn't*. And despite how many times God very obviously demonstrates to Gideon that he *can* be trusted, Gideon's just not buying it. So if you follow Gideon's story in its entirety, *this story* actually becomes a rather *embarrassing* moment in the life of Gideon.

Because this whole thing with the fleece, is the *epitome* of Gideon's trust problem. It's the low point of the story. It's meant to be this sort of face-palm moment where despite everything, Gideon *still* needs one more sign. To the point that God does *precisely* what Gideon asks for with the fleece, and Gideon *still doesn't believe it*. So Gideon then asks God to do the *exact same sign again*, but just in *reverse*, because he's *that unwilling* to take God at his word! **So the point of Gideon's story isn't that we should ask for signs like Gideon did, but rather that we shouldn't be that *slow* to trust in who God is and what he's capable of.**

So what's interesting is that I've actually heard a lot of Christians reference this story as if it's an example of what to do if you're unsure about something: you should "ask God for a sign" about what to do. To the point that I've even heard people pray, "God, give us a sign like you gave Gideon with the fleece." But if you're paying attention to everything *leading up to* this story, it's actually making the exact opposite point. *But*, here's the thing, if you just read the story about the fleece on its own, without asking where you are in the story, you could miss that that's the point it's making. Does that make sense? Okay, next question...

What does this passage tell us about the nature and character of God?

Well, a few things stand out to me. It tells us that God was indeed *with* Gideon, even when he called Gideon to difficult things. That's one thing that comes through in the story. I think it also shows us that God is *trustworthy*, even when *we* struggle and fail to trust him. Even though God has shown Gideon, time and time again, that he is trustworthy, he still gives Gideon the sign he asks for to communicate that reality to him one more time. So God is *with* Gideon, and he is *trustworthy*. Next...

What does this passage tell us about the nature and tendencies of humanity?

From the life of Gideon, I think it tells us that we are often slow to trust God and take him at his word. Gideon is terrified and anxious about God being with him, even though God has done nothing but be with him all along. Despite all the evidence we have that God can be trusted, we still often fail to trust him. Has anybody ever noticed that tendency in themselves before? Right, yeah, I definitely never struggle with that, just was curious if you guys did. And lastly...

How does this passage point us to the person and work of Jesus?

Well one would be that Jesus demonstrates through the cross that God *can* be trusted. Romans 8 says this: “*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*” Meaning, **if God can be trusted at the cross, he can be trusted period. If he didn’t withhold even his own son’s life for us, he can surely be trusted with whatever situation, whatever circumstance we are facing.** So for us as followers of Jesus, when we feel uncertain about God, we look not to signs or fleeces lying on the ground, but to the cross. *That’s* where we look when we struggle to know if God can be trusted. To the place where God proved it to us once and for all that he is with us. That’s how this story points us to Jesus.

So there—you’ve now got one under your belt. How ya feel? Decent? Not so great? I know that might seem like a lot, but keep in mind, I didn’t just rattle that off the top of my head. That actually took me sitting with this passage for a bit, combing it up and down with the questions for a few minutes. But does it at least seem *achievable*, with some practice? Good, that’s the hope.

Okay, let’s do another one. This one’s from the *New Testament*. Turn with me to Luke 5. I probably won’t be able to do this with *every* passage we cover, but I’m trying to use a lot of the passages that we’ve been reading in the past week or two in our Bible Reading Plan. So hopefully some of these are sounding familiar. ~~Or maybe you’re like me and you have horrible reading retention and they don’t sound familiar with all. No shame. Luke 5...~~

Luke 5:27-32

Here we read about an interaction that Jesus has with a tax collector, a subsequent party that he goes to, and then an interaction Jesus has with the Pharisees about his attendance at that party. So this is a narrative account, from *Jesus’* life. Let’s read through it together, starting in v. 27:

[27] After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me." [28] And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. [29] And Levi made him a **great feast** in his house, and there was a **large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.** [30] And **the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled** at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" [31] And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have **no need** of a physician, but those who are sick. [32] I have not come to call the righteous but **sinners to repentance.**"

There's our story, let's run it through our questions:

What is happening in this passage?

We'll sum it up this way: Jesus' acceptance of tax collectors and sinners get him in "trouble" with the Pharisees and teachers of the law. So we've talked about this in detail before, but tax collectors back then weren't just ancient IRS agents, they were traitors. They had effectively sold their soul to the occupying government, which didn't set well with the Jewish establishment being *oppressed* by that government. As a result, tax collectors were seen as highly immoral, and they kept highly immoral company. So the religious elite weren't big fans of Jesus and his disciples going to a party where those types of people would be there. That's why they don't like it. Second...

Where does this narrative *fit* in the larger story of Scripture?

Jesus is relatively early in his ministry, and he has just begun to call disciples to follow him. We're also in these early chapters of Luke, where the author is using Jesus' interactions with various people to show us who Jesus is, and what his ministry would be *about*. And in the course of the story, what we find is that all the people who you *wouldn't* expect to be drawn to Jesus are drawn to him, and all the people who *should* be drawn to Jesus are offended or put off by him. That's where we are in the story.

What does this passage tell us about the nature and character of God?

It tells us that he is merciful, as evidenced by Jesus extending grace and acceptance to highly immoral people. Apparently he hasn't come to just give his seal of approval to already religious people, but rather to call a whole new class and demographic of people into his kingdom. I think this passage also tells us that he has nothing to offer those that don't think they need mercy. He says "I haven't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Translation: if you think you're good on your own and have no sin separating you from God, you have no place in Jesus' kingdom. But if you are aware of

your sin and see it as a barrier you need removed, the great “physician” has come for you.

What does this passage tell us about the nature and tendencies of humanity?

It tells us that people are often quick to draw lines around who God can and can't accept, which is another way of saying we like to try and “force” God to accept who we accept, and reject who we reject. We are often guilty of predetermining who can and can't be in God's family. Have you ever noticed that tendency in humanity?

How does this passage point us to the person and work of Jesus?

Well, for starters, the story is *about* Jesus, right? Like, he's in the story. So that much is obvious. But more than that, Jesus' statement at the end indicates that the crew of people he came for is “sinners that need repentance.” Meaning those who do not see themselves as needing to repent, will find themselves *outside* the kingdom Jesus came to create on planet earth.

But at the same time, here's what we know: we know from other places in the bible that that *doesn't* mean God just turns a blind eye to sin and injustice. Exodus tells us that God will “by no means clear the guilty.” Meaning that he doesn't just say to those guilty of sin, “oh, it's not a big deal...come on in anyways!” Like, Levi is a *tax collector*. He is guilty of extorting and taking advantage of an already-oppressed group of people. God's not just going to notice that and go “well, I mean who really cares...that's not all that bad!” So the question is how can God remain just—how can he remain the God who cares for the poor and oppressed—while still inviting in those who trample on the oppressed? And that is what the cross was all about. On the cross, Jesus endures the justice due each and every sinner, each and every sin that they committed, and absorbs that justice into himself. So as a result, he can invite anyone and everyone into God's kingdom, because he knows their sin will be addressed through his death and resurrection. That's one big way that this story points to Jesus.

Does that make sense? So do you see how all of this works? I know it still might seem intimidating to some of us, but I think those questions really do give us a framework to begin wrapping our minds around the narrative passages that we find throughout the bible. We want to first ask “what is happening in this passage?” Then, “what part of the story are we in?” Then, “what does this passage tell us about the nature and character of God?” Then, “what does it tell us about the nature and tendency of humanity?” And finally, “how does this story lead us to Jesus?”

So at the end of the day, the purpose of narratives in the bible is *worship*. They're meant to lead us to *worship*. We are meant to read through these stories, and see on one hand the unbelievable self-destructive tendencies of humanity, and on the other hand, the unbelievable faithfulness and compassion of God, and have our hearts drawn to worship as a result. To be so overwhelmed with his response to humanity that all we can manage to do is think about and sing about and celebrate how incredibly good he is. You see that is actually what *worship is*: it's being privvy to the incredible ways that God has provided for his people to the point that you don't know how to respond other than to celebrate who he is. That's *worship*.

So that's exactly what we're going to do next. We'll have some time to just respond in worship to who God is, by singing about his faithfulness to us. As part of that, we'll give you the opportunity to take communion, which for followers of Jesus is a reminder and celebration of God's faithfulness to us by sending Jesus to be torn apart on the cross for our sake. We'll also be passing the offering baskets around, which is a way of *responding* to God's faithfulness: giving back a portion of what he has given us.

I'll invite you to stand as we pray.