

**How to Enjoy Your Bible**  
**Learning to ask the right questions of the text, #1**

**Intro:** As students of the word, we should take the greatest care to make sure that we approach God's word with the right questions so that we discern the meaning God intended and not impose our own ideas upon it. Tonight I want to talk about learning to ask the right questions of the text.

**Proper Bible study involves two important processes--exegesis and application. Both of these processes are a part of what some people might call our hermeneutics (our discipline of interpretation).**

***The first task of the interpreter is exegesis, discovering the text's meaning.***

Our word "exegesis" comes from Greek "exegeomai" meaning "to lead out or draw out."

"The goal in exegesis is to analyze passages carefully so that the words and intent of the passage are as clear as possible. Speculation is not prized, but attention to word meaning, form, structure, context (historical and biblical) and theology is usually addressed. (Patzia and Petrota, "Pocket Dictionary of Biblical Studies."

Our first approach to Scripture must be to try to span the distance and transport ourselves to the time and place of writing and ask the question, "What did the words of Scripture mean to those who first heard them?"

***After we have answered this question, the second task of the interpreter is application, discovering the text's significance for our own setting. We need to ask the question, "How can I take the information addressed to others in another time and apply to myself today?"***

We should avoid the tendency to get these questions backwards or ignore the first one altogether. Sometimes people will immediately read a passage; and they'll want to start talking about what it "means to me" or even read it as if it were directly addressed to them.

In an attempt to be "relevant" some Bible students are often poor exegetes of Scripture.

**Understanding the meaning of a text depends upon understanding the context of the writing.**

***Remember a few phrases from the previous quote: "...attention to word meaning, form, structure, context (historical and biblical) and theology is usually addressed." (We've already noted the importance of looking at structure in our last lesson.) Let's think then about reading a passage in its context.***

***First we should read the Scriptures in their historical context.***

When we approach a Biblical text we should try to be as well informed as possible about the background of the writing we are studying.

By whom and to whom was it written?

At what time and place was it written?

What circumstances or events prompted the writing?

What was the author's purpose in writing?

The answers to many of these questions are often found in the writings themselves. We need to train ourselves to look for internal clues that suggest the answers to the above questions. In a sense we must be spiritual detectives looking for clues that will help us solve the questions we're seeking to answer.

### **Techniques for answering the above questions about context**

#### ***Determining the author and recipients***

Most of the NT books have clear indicators of the author and recipients within the text itself. In those cases it is simply a matter of looking either at the beginning or end of the book for identification of the author and reader. The author and recipients of most of the NT epistles are clearly understood by means of the use of a standard letter format common to the first century.

Paul uses the standard letter format in virtually all his epistles (Roman 1:1-7; 1 Cor. 1:1-2; 2 Cor. 1:1, etc.)

The epistles of James, Peter, and Jude also follow this pattern (Jas. 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1)

However, other books are given titles by modern editors based on traditional understanding about their origin and readership rather than actual textual indicators.

First they look to the manuscript titles associated with them from antiquity which might suggest the probable author.

Second they might look at the internal evidence of the book to see if there are clues about who the author and recipients are.

Third they might look to extra-biblical evidence from ancient writers who lived nearer to the time of the writing and who had access to them.

Usually this kind of information can be supplied by the notes in a good study Bible or a Bible dictionary.

#### ***Determining the circumstances of the writer and his reading audience.***

The author may often refer to conditions or actions that he approves or disapproves.

Paul specifically recounts what he has learned about the church at Corinth in his letter to them (1 Cor. 1:11-12; 1 Cor. 5:1; 6:1) For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you.<sup>12</sup> Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:11-12)

Paul refers to the situation among the Galatians that prompted the writing of his strong words to them (Gal. 1:6; 3:1; 4:10ff; 5:2; 6:12-13)

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; (Galatians 1:6)

Sometimes the circumstances can be determined by the repetition of key words or by the exhortations being given.

The epistle of Peter has numerous references to the “suffering” of the readers (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6; 2:12; 3:14; 4:12; 5:10).

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, (1 Peter 1:6)

It appears that the Hebrew writer was concerned about those who were leaving the faith to return to Judaism (See Heb. 3:12; 4:4-8; 10:26-39; 13:13-14).

Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. (Hebrews 3:12)

Sometimes our reading can be supplemented by other Biblical books.

It is very useful to consider the epistles of Paul in view of the backdrop of the book of Acts. In many cases, Luke gives historical and cultural details that might help us in understanding a letter to the church.

For example, compare Luke’s description of Paul’s work and departure from Thessalonica (Ac. 17:1-10).

And they stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. And the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea; (Ac. 17:8-10)

It would help us understand Paul’s anxiety expressed in 1 Thes. 2:17-3:8.

***Determining the author's purpose in writing.***

Often the writer will give a specific description of what his purpose is.

Luke gives a formal introduction of his purposes in writing his gospel of Jesus (Lk. 1:1-4).

John gives clear statement of the method and purpose of his gospel (Jn. 20:30-31)

*Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31)*

And the purpose for writing his first epistle:

*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:13)*

In addition, look for repeated themes, commands, and warnings that might suggest the author's purpose in writing. In particular, note the conclusions found in the varying sections of the book. They will suggest the intended purpose of the author.

Notice in James the frequent use of the word "faith" and how it is expressed in the different circumstances of life or the word "perfect" as an indication of spiritual maturity. Could we conclude from such references that James goal was to show his readers how to display maturity in their faith in the varying circumstances of life?

### **Using these techniques with the NT epistle of Philippians**

#### ***How do we know this letter was written by Paul to the Philippians?***

It uses the common X to Y format of first century letter writing:  
*Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: (Philippians 1:1)*

And here it would also be important to remember the close relationship that Paul had with this congregation. He had first taught them the gospel and founded the church there (Ac. 16).

#### ***Where was Paul when he wrote this letter?***

The internal clues suggest a place of imprisonment.  
*Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. (Philippians 1:12-14)*

Comparing these statements with Luke's description of Paul's life in Acts we have at least two obvious possibilities:

Paul is writing from Caesarea based on Paul's imprisonment there.

But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case.".... But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned. (Acts 24:22,27)

Paul is writing from Rome

And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered. (Acts 28:30-31)

Some scholars have suggested Ephesus as a possibility for various reasons I won't get into right now; but of the two possibilities, Rome seems to be the more likely because of the

mention of the Praetorian guard and a greeting from those of "Caesar's household" (Phil. 4:22).

And if from Rome, we might also get some sense of the time of writing. Paul was in Rome from AD 60-61.

Sometimes we simply have to admit that we cannot know for certain some answers to the questions we're raising; but still the process is important.

Perhaps more important than location is Paul's circumstances of imprisonment and the difficulties associated with that which Paul discusses in his letter. What insight would Paul give us about his prison experience? How does he see that as a Christian? Is he discouraged or depressed?

***Why has Paul chosen to write them at this particular time and for what purpose?***

Paul does not give any particular purpose statement in the course of his writing (i.e. no "I am writing because...").

The internal clues indicate that the Philippians had heard of Paul's imprisonment and had sent Epaphroditus with a gift for Paul.

*But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. (Philippians 4:18)*

So we might immediately think of the letter as having been prompted by the gift--an extended thank you note acknowledging the gift the Philippians had received.

But there may be another important clue:

*But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. (Philippians 2:25-27)*

To relieve the Philippians distress over the well-being of both Paul and Epaphroditus. In addition Paul indicates by the letter that he plans to send Timothy also so that he can bring back information about how the congregation is doing.

*But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father. Therefore I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things go with me; and I trust in the Lord that I myself also shall be coming shortly. (Philippians 2:19-24)*

But there is another noteworthy characteristic of the letter. Paul over the course of the four chapters uses the word "joy" or some form of it at least 14 times. Does he want to use his circumstances as a way of teaching the Philippians how to experience real joy in the face of difficult circumstances?

And beyond all these things we could look at the particular concerns Paul stresses:

The need stand firm against opposition (1:27ff)

The need to be united and humble toward one another (2:1ff)

The need to avoid Judaizing teachers and continue growing toward spiritual maturity (3:1ff)

The need to keep rejoicing in all circumstances (4:4ff)

**And so by answering some key background questions we are already well on our way to establishing a context for Paul's letter. His remarks are shaped by both his and the Philippians' circumstances.**

**Conclusion: Keep these thoughts in mind as you read the Bible from day to day. Let it become a habit to ask the key questions as you any section of texts and you will come away with a much better understanding of God's message.**