

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

How to Study the Bible



SESSION 5
Exploration

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Exploration: An Overview

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LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should be able to:

- explain why Exploration is important for studying Scripture
- articulate the main question we seek to answer about a Bible
- describe the different kinds of questions we want to ask of a Bible passage

Exploration: An Overview

INTRODUCTION



The next step in effective Bible study is Exploration. In this step we take on the role of an investigative reporter who asks all kinds of question in order to discover as much information about the Bible passage as possible. We will ask many questions, but the main one that we are trying to answer is, “What did this Bible passage mean to its original audience?”

That question can be answered by asking a series of other questions related to four features of the text: its historical background, its word meanings, its literary context and character, and its theological ideas. Information gained in each of these areas will help us know how people who first heard this passage understood its message.

Focusing upon the meaning of the Bible for its original audience helps us overcome a major obstacle to effective Bible study that we talked about in a previous session. This is the challenge of our presuppositions. By considering how the original audience heard the message of a Bible passage, we can remove some of our subjectivity. We can look at the text as an outsider and listen to its message speak into the life of someone else. As a result, we will be less likely to read things into the text based on our preconceived notions.

QUESTIONS ABOUT HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



NOTES

Exploring the historical background of a Bible passage involves asking about the world of the text as well as the world in the text. The world of the text includes both the author and audience of the passage as well as their circumstances when it was written. If we receive an email or text, we want to know who wrote it. The meaning of its message depends on who sent it. In addition, their circumstances as well as ours often affect the meaning of what is said. The same is true of the Bible. The more we know about the author and those addressed in a book of the Bible, the more we understand what is being said.

Unfortunately this kind of information is difficult to discern in some books of the Bible. We do not know who wrote the books of Kings or Chronicles, for example. On the other hand, we do have a pretty good idea who was involved with the books of the prophets of the Old Testament and the letters of the New Testament.

Discovering the circumstances of Paul and his audience in each of his letters proves very helpful for understanding the messages contained in his letters. Knowing that Paul wrote Philippians from prison, for example, increases our appreciation for the upbeat, positive tone of the letter. We can truly believe that he knows the truth of his words when he wrote, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:15).

In addition to examining the world of the text, we will want to ask about the world in the text. Biblical writers often refer to people and events without filling in much information on them. Matthew, for example, tells us that Jesus was born “during the time of King Herod” (Matthew 2:1). We learn a little about Herod from the gospel, but if we knew more about his relationship to the Roman Empire and his ruthless rule in Judea, our understanding of the story of Jesus’ birth would be greatly enhanced. We would see that Herod’s murder of innocent children in Bethlehem was very much in line with a man who had executed a wife and son for fear of losing his power.

So whenever we encounter names of people and places, we will want to seek to know more about them. This is also true of references to customs and ideas in the biblical world. Knowing something about funerals and burial practices during the time of Jesus, for example, will help us better understand the story of Lazarus. We will know why a stone must be removed in order for Lazarus to come out of his tomb (John 11:38). The more we know about the world in the text, the more we will understand the message of a passage for its original audience.

QUESTIONS ABOUT WORD MEANINGS



NOTES

Most writers choose their words carefully. They want to communicate a particular idea, so they select words and phrase that best convey that idea. For us to understand what a biblical author intended to say, we often need to ask what a particular word or group of words meant to them.

As we noted in Session 2, many words carry a range of meanings, not just one single meaning. The word heart, for example, basically refers to an organ that pumps blood. But it is often used in the Bible to refer to the inner person, sometimes in reference to our emotions and at other times in reference to our thoughts. Thus its particular meaning will depend upon its usage within a passage. We must ask how this word is being used in the passage we are studying. To help with this determination, we might also ask how the writer uses this word throughout the book in which our passage resides.

Often biblical writers used words that carried special religious meaning, like righteousness, repentance, sanctification, or salvation. These are words we do not use every day. So it is helpful to ask what ideas these words conveyed in the biblical world. Righteousness, for example, is about doing the right thing. In our world we might think of things we consider right; but in the biblical world, God determines what is right. Righteousness describes actions that are right according to God's standard. What seems right in the eyes of humans or some other authority is not the issue.

The meaning of some words may fool us. We may read a familiar word and think we understand exactly what it says. But the truth is, its meaning to the biblical writer may include something about which we had not thought. For example, the word love usually expresses special preference for someone or something. This is true of the biblical words for love as well. But the Bible uses several different words for love, which add particular meanings to this basic concept. One word connotes mutual friendship, while another conveys a deeper kind of committed love. The latter does not ask for love in return; it prefers another person regardless of the response.

In order to find out what a word means, we might begin with an English dictionary. But that will give us a modern definition and may not reflect all that the biblical use of the word means. So we will want to consult other sources. Fortunately there are several helpful ones. Chapter Seven provides a list of some specialized resources for finding the meaning of biblical words.

QUESTIONS ABOUT LITERARY CONTEXT AND CHARACTER



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A third line of questions relates to the literary context and character of a passage. While a verse or paragraph of the Bible might be meaningful by itself, the full impact of its message relies on the context in which it is found. Biblical writers intentionally arranged their material, so we must ask why a particular passage sits in a book where it does. What comes before it, and what comes after it? What are the connections between the passages?

In narratives, passages often follow a chronological progression. That is, one passage in the gospels generally follows another because it happened next in time sequence. But at times, even events in the life of Jesus have been arranged thematically. They only follow a general chronology. So Mark records several parables that Jesus told in chapter 4. Mark indicates that these represent the kinds of things Jesus taught on several different occasions and not all at one time. Three of the parables talk about seeds and one about a lamp. We might ask why Mark arranged these parables as he did. What is the connection between these four parables? In particular, how does the theme of the lamp parable relate to the seed parables? By asking and answering such questions, we can see how Bible writers combined passages in order to emphasize main points.

Biblical writers also employed different kinds of literature to convey their messages. Each kind of literature demands that we read it in a different way and sets up different expectations for us. Paul's letters, for example, are not like the Book of Revelation or the gospels. Similarly, prophets in the Old Testament expressed their messages much differently than the writer of the books of Kings. Even within one book we will find different styles of literature. The book of Psalms, for example, contains praises and laments as well as several other types of songs. The Old Testament prophets employ a variety of speech forms as well.

Therefore we will want to ask what kind of literature we are reading, and what is the best way to understand it. We will certainly listen to poetry much differently than prose. But what about proverbs, laws, historical narratives, prophetic speeches, letters, and parables? How should we listen to them? What is typical about each of these?

QUESTIONS ABOUT THEOLOGY



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Once we have explored the historical background, the meaning of words and the literary context and character of a Bible passage, we are ready to ask about its theology. What does our passage say about God, about people, and about salvation? These are three key questions we want to explore.

Since the first purpose of the Bible is to tell us about God, our questions about what our passage says about Him are very important. We might begin by asking what names our passage uses to speak of God. The Bible employs a number of divine names and titles that express different characteristics of God. The name LORD Almighty, for example, emphasizes God's unmatched ability to overcome any obstacle, as He did in delivering the Israelites from Egypt. The name Holy One of Israel, on the other hand, highlights God's uniqueness and personal interest in his people.

We will also want to notice what God says and does in our passage and ask what those things tell us about God. Do God's words and actions tell us something about God's heart? What motivates God? What concerns God the most in this passage? How does God relate to people? How does God envision the future for his people?

In addition to what the passage tells us about God, it will likely tell us something about people too. We will notice that Scripture always defines humans in relation to God, never merely in secular terms. We might ask what our passage says about the nature of humans. What does it convey about the purpose, the problem, and the destiny of human beings?

Finally, we might ask what our passage says about salvation. A constant theme in the Bible is how God works to rescue humans from themselves and their circumstances. How does God go about saving people? What does salvation look like in this passage? What is the result of God's work in the lives of people?

CONCLUSION

**NOTES**

Answering questions about the historical background, the meanings of words, the literary context and character, and the theology of a passage will help us discover the message of that passage for its original audience. Such exploration allows us to hear the Bible's message to an ancient people. As such it keeps us from imposing our own ideas on the Bible.

But we might ask how we can find the answer to these questions. Most of us do not possess enough knowledge in these areas to adequately respond to such questions. Fortunately we have many resources available to help us. In Chapter Seven we will talk about the many tools available to us for answering the questions of our exploration.

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Look at the learner objectives for this session. Can you:
 - explain why exploration is important for studying Scripture?
 - articulate the main question we seek to answer about a Bible passage?
 - describe the different kinds of questions we want to ask of a Bible passage?
2. Read the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-31, and make a list of the kinds of questions you might ask about the historical background, the key words, the literature, and the theology of this passage?
3. Read the parables in Mark 4:1-34, and ask yourself why they are arranged as they are. What is the connection between the first and second parables, the second and third ones, etc.?

EXAM - SESSION 5



NOTES

1. Exploration is important for studying Scripture because _____.
 - A. it helps answer the question of what the passage meant to its first audience
 - B. it makes us feel smarter
 - C. it is not really all that important
 - D. all of these
2. What four key things in a Bible passage should we ask questions about?
 - A. Historical background
 - B. Word meanings
 - C. Literary context and character
 - D. Theology
 - E. All of these
3. What two areas of interest should we ask about historical backgrounds?
 - A. The world before the text
 - B. The world of the text
 - C. The world in the text
 - D. The world after the text
 - E. B & C
4. One reason we need to ask about the meaning of words is that _____.
 - A. a word may not mean the same thing in every context
 - B. words do not always carry the same meaning today as they did in Bible times
 - C. we do not use some Bible words regularly today
 - D. all of these
5. The literary context of a passage is important because Bible writers _____.
 - A. arranged their materials intentionally
 - B. connected passages thematically, not just chronologically
 - C. combined passages to make main points
 - D. all of these
6. Asking about the kind of literature the Bible writer used is helpful because we will read different kinds of literature differently.
 - A. True
 - B. False

**NOTES**

7. In order to explore the theology of a Bible passage we should ask questions about _____.
 - A. God
 - B. people
 - C. salvation
 - D. all of the above

8. One of the most important things to ask about a Bible passage is what name or title is used for God, and what that means.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor:

1. Why is the skill of exploration so important for studying the Bible?
2. What questions might we ask about the historical background of a Bible passage?
3. What questions might we ask about the meaning of words in a Bible passage?
4. What questions might we ask about the literary context and character of a Bible passage?
5. What questions might we ask about God, humans, and salvation in a Bible passage?