

## CCH 26<sup>th</sup> Jan 2020 Why the Bible #3: Interpreting the Bible

Reading: 2 Peter 3:12-21. I'd like to start today with a verse from **2 Tim 2: 7** "Reflect on what I am saying and the Lord will give you insight into all this". Let's pray.

I was having a conversation with a friend of my mum about the rights and wrongs of eating meat- she was a vegetarian! And I was trying to explain why I didn't think it was a wrong to kill animals and eat them. [Now can I say, if you are a visitor today, and you are a vegetarian, you are very welcome, as are the vegetarians regulars in our congregation. You may have all sorts of very good reasons for not eating meat, and my purpose today is not to seek to change your mind]. But I tried to explain to my mum's friend that for me the Bible is what helps me make these kinds of decisions, and as a Christian I believe that so long as we treat animals humanely (and I'd add to that today, so long as we pay careful attention to sustainability and stewardship of the environment) we are permitted to kill and eat, and that all foods are now permitted to Christians whether it's a juicy steak or a pheasant casserole. And she said, "Well you would say that".

The point was that she felt I was using the Bible to justify what I already wanted to believe. I didn't get anywhere in the conversation, and the whole chat made me reflect that if you are not careful, after a few years of studying the Bible you can begin to become an expert in attempting to make pretty convincing arguments to argue for what you want. So can I read the Bible rightly, and can I even trust myself to read the Bible rightly?

On top of that, since there are so many Christians that come to so many different conclusions about what they feel the Bible is telling them to do, is there actually a right way of reading it anyway? How do we read the Bible in a way that we aren't just making it say whatever we want it to say? That's our question for today.

Well having looked at the **character** of the Bible in week 1 (more wonderful than weird) and at the **author** and **authority** of the bible in week 2, we are today looking at how do you read the Bible. How do you **interpret** it correctly... if there is a correct **way**?

And I think that this verse is a good place to start. **2 Tim 2: 7** "Reflect on what I am saying and the Lord will give you insight into all this".

And here are the two things we are going to see today. The first is shorter than the second. 1) Read it with **prayer**. 2) Read it with **care**!

### **1) Read the Bible with prayer, looking to the Lord.**

Paul is talking to young pastor Timothy and encouraging him to use his brain to think about what he (Paul) is writing to him in this letter that became part of the New Testament. But the promise here is that he is to do it, looking upwards as it were, so that **the Lord** will give him insight into it. Read it with prayer.

This balance perfectly matches what we saw last week about the Bible being written by **people** (eg Paul with his individuality and circumstances) and by **God** (overruling to get every word to be what he wants). So we read it with care (point 2) and we read it with prayer (point 1).

If God is the one speaking to us from this book- if it is all breathed out by him- then we would do well to ask him for help. As Ps **119**:18 puts it "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law"

We mustn't be like a proud schoolkid that thinks that he knows everything it says before we open the book. We must come humbly to the Bible, trembling before Almighty God asking Him to speak to us.

So it's essential that we pray for the help of God's Spirit whenever we turn to the Bible- on our own, or in a Bible study group, or as we did today, in a sermon. Otherwise we will fill our brains with information at Life Group on a Wednesday night, but it won't actually change how we live on a Thursday morning at work. It won't get through, and we'll walk away unchanged. It's probably the most important thing for today.

So interpret the Bible with **prayer**. That is to say, looking to the Lord to give us insight into it and to change us. But that doesn't exclude the "reflecting" part of the verse too (2 Tim 2:7), and that brings us onto our next part...

## **2) Read the Bible with care, looking at the context.**

Now it's possible to be rather overcomplicated about how to interpret the Bible, and get a little bit tangled in knots with rules and methods for interpreting it correctly. It's also a slippery area where people can twist things. But the basic principle is that because it is a book with arguments and sentences and paragraphs, it deserves to be read like any other, carefully in context (that means paying attention to the material around it- the setting in which the text is found). And any of us can do that! As it's often been said, take a text **out of it's context** (surroundings) **and you have a con!**

So every phrase of the Bible is part of a paragraph or a section (often given a heading by the translators), and each section is part of a Bible book (Matthew, Ecclesiastes, Psalms) and each of the 66 books is part of an overall. You could say that the Bible is a little bit like an onion- having those different layers around it.

So we're going to see that the Bible needs to be read in it's paragraph, book and Bible context. I hope looking at each of those briefly will help us to be better students of the Bible and be a good introduction to Bible interpretation. I'll try and give us some examples as we go of some tricky passages.

**First let's we read it in its immediate context- within the paragraph or surrounding section that you are in.**

Did you know that I can make the Bible say that there is no God.  
*Psalm 14:1 "There is no God".*  
*But Psalm 14:1a in full.... "The fool says in his heart "there is no God"."*  
So there's a pretty basic example of just reading the Bible in its context.

Another one: the book of Job in the Old Testament is about a poor guy whose life falls apart. He loses his herds, his family and his health almost overnight. It's tragic. A book all about suffering. Yet he still trusts God.

Now if you open the book of Job at random, you may find the words of one of his friends or so called "comforters", Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. They use lovely poetic language, but they don't give very good advice.

They all say that he must have done something wrong to deserve what he went through. Read their advice in context, and you'll see it's wrong! All I'm saying is read it carefully in its surrounding context.

Just to zoom out a little bit more how about 1 Corinthians 13, we have a lovely poem about love, that is often used in weddings. "Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude". Actually reading the chapters either side, and you'll see that it's a telling off. They were a showy offy church who were using their gifts to make themselves look good. They weren't being patient, kind, they were being like a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. Read it in it's surrounding context!

**Second read it in the context of its book.**

Now this is really important. This helps in so many ways. It first means we pay careful attention to what kind of literature it is. You don't read a Shakespeare poem the same way that you read an IKEA manual.

Within the Bible's 66 books we have poetry, law, lists, apocalyptic, letters, biography, narrative and proverbs You pay attention to the kind of literature you have before you in the specific book you are reading.

~~For example a Proverb is a wise saying designed to make you think (rather than a law like the 10 commandments), which is why you can have two proverbs right next to each other saying opposite things:~~

~~Do not answer fools according to their folly,  
—or you will be a fool yourself. — Proverbs 26:4~~  
~~Answer fools according to their folly,  
—or they will be wise in their own eyes. — Proverbs 26:5~~

Proverbs aren't laws they are principles and sayings. ~~I'll let you work that out in your own time, and why it's not a contradiction. But my point is,~~ read it according to the kind of literature it is. Another example: Genesis 1 isn't a science book. It fits with science beautifully, but it's not to telling us in scientific terms all the details by which God made the world.

But **a second thing** about reading it in the context of the book is that it helps us with the words. As one great [Bible teacher](#) puts it “Bible words have Bible meanings”.

So even if you take a really well-known verse like John 3:16 (perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible, and an excellent summary of the Christian faith), what do the individual words mean?

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”.*

What does **love** mean? Well ask 10 people on the street and you’ll get 10 different answers. What does the **world** mean? Wiki dictionary suggests it could mean the planet or part of a computer’s operating system. But Bible words have Bible meanings.

So the best way to understand a Bible word is to look up how it is used elsewhere by that same writer in the Bible as a whole, or in that bible book. With the internet this is so easy.

If you are stuck on a word, just log onto [Bible gateway.com](http://Biblegateway.com) and you can easily search for

- “Fullness” in Colossians.
- The “fool” in Proverbs.
- Or in our case: all the occurrences of “World” in John’s gospel or in his letters. (it refers to humanity in rebellion against God).

This way you’ll get to understand the meanings of words because you will see how they are used in that context. And in John 3:16 you see that God loves a *rebellious* humanity with an amazing *sacrificial* love.

**Lastly** in this section on book context, we need to recognise that the situation of the first readers is not exactly the same situation as when we read the Bible, and going back in time to think about what it meant for them helps us to think about what it is saying to us.

This is not as complicated as it sounds. Let me give you an example.

In Deuteronomy 22:8 we have “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof”. Now I happen to know that one of the families in our church is moving house, and the dad is a builder. Is he going to make sure there’s castle like barricades around the top of his house alongside the steep tiled roof? Do you all have a parapet?

No- going back to OT Israel, where we know from other bits of the Bible that there were flat roofs that people could sit out on, or even sleep on if it was warm. The point is about early Israelite health and safety and loving your neighbour, or your granny if she comes to stay. Today we might apply that verse by making sure there’s a handrail on the stairs. There’s a really difficult one for you to work through in Life groups about head coverings!

Do you see that we need to read the Bible in its **section**, and in the light of the **book** that it’s in. That’s a reason why we normally study books of the Bible as a whole, like Nehemiah in a couple of weeks, so that we can really go back to Jerusalem in 444 BC, and not take the message out of context.

But there’s a final context to each verse of the Bible, zooming out, and that is the whole story of the **Bible** as a whole. This is the outermost layer of the Bible, and this is probably the most important thing about context.

**Third read it in the context of the whole Bible story.**

Now if you think about it, it’s amazing that we have the Bible. God could have sent us just one page of A4, enough words to make one chapter. Now that would be amazing. We would be looking very carefully at that page and marvelling that we have a letter from heaven.

But we have more of a library of 66 books containing 1189 chapters and over 31,000 verses. That’s enough to keep any of us going for a lifetime. The Bible is an ocean that the youngest child can paddle in, but the biggest elephant can never plumb all it’s depths.

But here’s an amazing thing about the Bible. It’s one Book! It’s all breathed out by God, and he organised it from start to finish to say what he wanted and it tells **one story about Jesus**. We saw that with our reference in week 1 to the road to Emmaus.

Because of that it has an incredible consistency and coherence, and it has one overarching story, as us men are learning in our Bible overview<sup>1</sup>: it really does tell one story from start to finish about God rescuing his people in Jesus.

So we have to use the Bible for the purpose that it's given. When I was little I have a distant memory of using a cricket bat, (I can't remember if it was mine or my dad's) to bash the cricket stumps in the ground. I don't think the result was a very happy one, because a cricket bat isn't designed to be used in that way and it got rather dented.

Nor is the Bible designed to be used to predict the exact timing of the end of the world- the Bible itself says we can't know. And we can't use it to tell us how to play chess or do computer programming. Actually Chitrangani told me that it does have advice for when you get a bad cough, because "Moses came down from the mountain with two tablets!"

But it is a story about Jesus, and how to find friendship with God through him. So we need to read it in the light of what it teaches us about Jesus.

So the story about David and Goliath isn't primarily to help us to face **our** giants. It's to teach us about God's great rescuing King, Jesus who also defeats his enemies (and once you know that, you can face your giants!).

And the Psalms written by David also tell us about Jesus' sufferings and how God uses them to bring us rescue. Read each text in the light of where it comes in salvation history, because the Bible is one book.

And the OT laws about sacrifice and food laws have found fulfilment in Christ, and so need to be read in the light of the New Testament.

**So read the Bible prayerfully, and read the Bible carefully.** Don't do what Peter tells his readers is happening with some of Paul's letters. And this is our last passage (it's what we saw in our reading: [2 Pe 3](#)):

*"Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes*

*the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people **distort**, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction".*

Did you see that? There's loads here.

- Paul's letters are put alongside the Old Testament Scriptures.
- Peter says some parts are hard to understand.
- But since they are full of the wisdom that comes from God, we mustn't **distort** the NT or the OT. We mustn't make it say what it isn't saying. That's a recipe for disaster and destruction.

So read the Bible prayerfully. And read it carefully. Don't just take everything you hear from every preacher on the internet, or every book you find. And check what I and other preachers here say against the Bible that we aren't distorting or twisting the words, and please pray that we wouldn't.

If there's something you are worried about in how the Bible is being taught, here or elsewhere, talk with a friend, come and talk with me.

Yes there will still be disagreements this side of heaven between prayerful careful Bible readers who take the Bible seriously. ("In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity").

Some things are less clear or dogmatic in Scripture than we might like, and we may find ourselves disagreeing on the details of baptism, the gifts of the Spirit or the roles of women. Sometimes for all our good intentions, we get it wrong, and need to come back to the Scriptures humbly and honestly.

But I hope we can see today, that even if it is in some ways a deep and at times complex book, which people misuse, let's resolve to read it prayerfully and carefully in context, asking God to teach us, because God wants to communicate with us, and in the Bible we meet with the most wonderful Saviour & Lord: Jesus Christ. **Let's pray.**

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<sup>1</sup> See Vaughan Roberts God's Big Picture at <https://www.godsbigpicture.co.uk/>