These Christian leaders were part of a team who consulted on the creation of The Gospel Project.

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Summary and Goal

This lesson explores four genres of Scripture that help us interpret God’s Word responsibly: historical narrative, wisdom literature, prophecy, and letters. By focusing on these four styles of writing, we can acquire the principles and guidelines needed to understand not only a particular passage of Scripture but also how that passage fits into the overarching narrative of God’s plan of redemption.

Steps to Prepare

1. Read this week’s passages, and take note of the different genres of each:
   - Genesis 30:1-6
   - Proverbs 22:6; 26:4-5
   - Joel 2:28-32 (see also the fulfillment in Acts 2:14-21)
   - Galatians 1:1-7

2. Study the Expanded Lesson Content (pp. 138-145).
   - Consider ways to personalize the lesson content for you and your class.

3. Review the Teaching Plan (pp. 136-137).
   - Refine and adjust the lesson plan based on your group’s particular needs.

4. Pray for the Lord’s guidance as you lead your group through this material.

Lesson Outline

1. Interpreting Historical Narrative (Gen. 30:1-6)
2. Interpreting Wisdom Literature (Prov. 22:6; 26:4-5)
3. Interpreting Prophecy (Joel 2:28-32)
4. Interpreting Letters (Gal. 1:1-7)
Introduce the Lesson

Christians are pilgrim aliens who seek a city “whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). God has given us a map—the Holy Scripture—and we must interpret it correctly (leader p. 138; personal study p. 112).

Summarize the goal of this lesson: to aid believers in interpreting the Bible correctly so we may understand it and apply it to our lives.

1. Interpreting Historical Narrative

Read Genesis 30:1-6. Ask the group to help you point out the dangers of misinterpreting historical narrative.

- What would be some improper interpretations or applications of this passage?

Using the story of Jacob and Rachel’s sin, highlight the difference between description and prescription and how the confusion of these can lead to faulty and even dangerous conclusions (leader pp. 139-140; personal study p. 113).

Transition

Point out the principles to keep in mind when interpreting historical narrative (leader p. 140; personal study p. 113); identify the three primary kinds of context of a story that need to be understood for historical narrative (leader p. 140).

- What is the immediate, remote, and historical context of Genesis 30:1-6? How does knowing the context help us interpret and apply the individual story?

2. Interpreting Wisdom Literature

Read Proverbs 22:6 and 26:4-5.

Using the story of Jill and her parents, emphasize that wisdom literature must be interpreted in accordance with its purpose (leader pp. 140-141; personal study p. 114).
Highlight
Highlight that while a proverb is generally true, it is not a fail-safe promise in every situation.

What are some other proverbs that are generally true and yet not applicable to every circumstance?

Describe the differences among Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs (leader pp. 141-142), and then go over the principles for interpreting wisdom literature (leader p. 142; personal study p. 114).

3. Interpreting Prophecy
Read Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:14-21. Emphasize that before the genre of prophecy is applied to our lives, it must first be contextualized.

Read Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:21-22. According to these Bible passages, what distinguishes a true prophet from a false prophet?

Highlight
Explain the importance of seeking out what a prophet originally intended to say to his own generation (forthtelling) before exploring what the prophet said about the future (foretelling) (leader p. 143; personal study p. 116).

Go over the principles for interpreting prophecy (leader p. 143; personal study p. 116).

4. Interpreting Letters
Read Galatians 1:1-7. Highlight that the genre of letters cannot be understood rightly until it is properly contextualized (leader p. 144; personal study p. 117).

What are some ways in which ancient letters are different than the letters we write today? What are some similarities? How does knowledge of ancient letter-writing help us understand the New Testament letters?

Highlight
Discuss the importance of recognizing cultural mandates and how to apply to our lives the principles behind them (leader p. 145).

Note the principles for interpreting letters (leader p. 144; personal study p. 117).

Conclusion
Use the Emmaus road example as the conclusion, showing that Jesus is our Guide and our Destination when traveling through the story line of Scripture (leader p. 145; personal study p. 117).

For Further Discussion
Read Matthew 15:1-9. In what ways was Jesus a forthteller? Read Luke 22:34,54-62. In what ways was He a foreteller? From your understanding of Scripture, which did He do more frequently?

For Further Discussion
Compare Joel 2:12-14; Malachi 3:10; and Jonah 3:10. What does God reveal about Himself in these three texts? Do these characteristics change? Why or why not?

For Further Discussion
In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther wrote, “The right separation between Law and Gospel is very important to know. Christian doctrine is impossible without it. Let all who love and fear God, diligently learn the difference, not only in theory but also in practice.” How would you describe the difference between law and gospel?
Opening Illustration

What would you think if I told you that you were an alien? Not the scaly green kind with big foreheads but the biblical kind, the kind Peter talked about when he reminded the Christians living in Asia Minor that they were “strangers and temporary residents” (1 Pet. 2:11)?

To be an alien, in the biblical sense, is to belong to another land. It’s the idea that our ultimate citizenship belongs to another Kingdom, to another King. The Bible consistently teaches that Christians are a sojourning society, traveling from one world to the next.

God has given His Word to His traveling pilgrims—the Holy Scripture. In it we discover how to travel, where to travel, and the ways in which we can bring others along on the journey. But the Scriptures must be interpreted correctly in order for it to make sense. Written in the contexts of numerous empires and eras, the biblical writers differed greatly from one another. There were humble shepherds like David and wise sages like Solomon, simple fishermen like Peter and educated scholars like Paul.

Failing to understand each writer and the context, genre, and purpose of such writings can lead not only to a skewed understanding of Scripture but also to unnecessary heartache, confusion, and misdirection.

In this week’s lesson, we’ll explore four genres of Scripture that will help us interpret God’s Word responsibly: historical narrative, wisdom literature, prophecy, and letters. By focusing on these four styles of writing, we can acquire several principles and guidelines in order to understand not only a particular passage of Scripture but also how that passage fits into the overarching narrative of God’s redeeming plans.
1. Interpreting Historical Narrative (Gen. 30:1-6)

1. When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she envied her sister. “Give me sons, or I will die!” she said to Jacob.

2. Jacob became angry with Rachel and said, “Am I in God’s place, who has withheld children from you?”

3. Then she said, “Here is my slave Bilhah. Go sleep with her, and she’ll bear children for me so that through her I too can build a family.”

4. So Rachel gave her slave Bilhah to Jacob as a wife, and he slept with her.

5. Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; yes, He has heard me and given me a son,” and she named him Dan.

A Sunday School teacher in Nebraska once asked a group of fourth-graders, “What is the hardest commandment for you to keep?” One replied, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” When asked what adultery meant, he explained, “It means ‘Do not talk back to adults.’”

Misunderstanding the words of Scripture is not merely a fourth-grade problem. Adults can fail to understand them too. And in some cases, the outcome of this misunderstanding can be heartbreaking.

In January 2011, 28-year-old John Joe Thomas read Leviticus 20:13 and then acted on his reading by stoning to death a 70-year-old man. Charged with first-degree murder, Thomas claimed that his reading of the Old Testament compelled him to do it.

Stories like these are extreme, but they serve to remind us of the importance of rightly interpreting God’s Word. In the passage above, we read an R-rated narrative in which Jacob’s wife Rachel cannot become pregnant. So she tells her husband to commit adultery with Bilhah, her slave. Jacob obeys his wife and sleeps with Bilhah, who becomes pregnant with two sons, Dan and Naphtali.

What would be some improper interpretations or applications of this passage?

For us to interpret this passage correctly, we need to understand the genre of historical narrative. Approximately 60 percent of the Bible is historical narrative. Sidney Greidanus says historical narrative is the “central, foundational, and all-encompassing genre of the Bible.” The purpose of historical narrative literature is simply to narrate, to tell a story.

Some of these stories contain acts of great faith, like that of Abraham, who left his home in Ur to travel as a pilgrim and alien to a foreign land. Other stories contain acts of great heroism, like Samson, who picked up the jawbone of a donkey and killed one thousand Philistines.

The Bible contains stories of encouragement and depression, sorrows and celebrations. The characters are many. There is Solomon in his...
sanctuary and Daniel in his den, Jonah in his whale and Paul in his prison. The plots are unpredictable—a slave who became powerful in Egypt; a shepherd who became king of Israel. Some of these stories reflect the faithfulness of God’s people, while others reflect the consequences of neglecting to obey God.

Rachel’s story reflects the disobedience of neglecting God’s standard. Rachel “envied her sister” because of her sons. Just as Eve tempted Adam and Adam succumbed to her temptation, so Rachel sparked in Jacob’s mind a sin that caused them both to stray from God’s holy standard. This story was included in the canon of Scripture to describe the events of Jacob’s life, not to encourage us to follow in his sin.

It is vitally important to understand the context of a historical narrative. There are three primary kinds of context: Immediate context—the words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs immediately surrounding the biblical text. Remote context—the chapters and sections surrounding the biblical text. And historical context—the historical setting in which the biblical text was written. Each of these contexts is important in determining how to interpret a particular passage in Scripture.

What is the immediate, remote, and historical context of Genesis 30:1-6? How does knowing the context help us interpret and apply the individual story?

2. Interpreting Wisdom Literature (Prov. 22:6; 26:4-5)

6 Teach a youth about the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

4 Don’t answer a fool according to his foolishness or you’ll be like him yourself.

5 Answer a fool according to his foolishness or he’ll become wise in his own eyes.

Jill’s parents did everything right. They raised their daughter according to the truths of Scripture. Prayers before meals; prayers before bed. Church three times a week. During the summer, Jill attended church-sponsored camps where she memorized Bible verses. During the semester, she attended a top-tier private Christian school. In college, Jill renounced any faith she might have had and intentionally distanced herself from church. Expelled for drug and alcohol use, she moved in to live with her boyfriend. Jill’s parents were shocked. “What have we done wrong?” they asked. “Why has Jill rejected the God we raised her to love?”

Church friends quietly whispered about Jill’s parents’ failure to raise a good child. After all, Proverbs 22:6 says, “Teach a youth about the way he
should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” If Jill departed, it must mean her parents failed. Good parenting in, good kids out, right?

Not so fast. Interpreting the proverbs as promises is a critical mistake that can fuel legalism, moralism, and disillusionment. Once again, we see the importance of knowing how to interpret the different genres of Scripture and the heartache that comes from a misguided interpretation.

The Book of Proverbs is a collection of wise sayings that is categorized under the umbrella of wisdom literature. Unlike the genre of historical narrative that purposes to tell a story, wisdom literature provides general truths about living in a way that honors God.

A proverb is a pithy and persuasive statement or series of statements that has been proven true by experience. However, proverbs are not proven true in every case. For instance, Proverbs 3:1-3 says that if you obey the commandments in Scripture, “they will bring you many days, a full life.” This doesn’t mean that all Christians who obey God’s commandments will live into their late 70s and 80s. Instead, it means that if you live a life of discipline (1:2), avoid falling into sexual promiscuity (2:16-19), maintain character and integrity in your relationships (3:29-30), and guard your lips from lies (4:24), then it is generally true that the pitfalls that come from sinful actions will escape you.

Not always though. Sometimes obeying God’s commandments can directly lead to premature death. Take Stephen, for instance. After being faithful to Christ’s instructions to preach the gospel to all nations (Mark 16:15), Stephen boldly proclaimed God’s truth and was stoned to death (Acts 7:54-60). Proverbs are general truths. We need to interpret them in that way.

Likewise, we cannot pull one proverb out of context and apply it universally. The two proverbs in Proverbs 26:4-5 appear to contradict one another until you realize that the author is referring to different circumstances. Sometimes it’s best to speak to the fool; other times it’s best to stay silent.

What are some other proverbs that are generally true and yet not applicable to every circumstance?

Like the Book of Proverbs, the other books of wisdom literature (Job, Psalms, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes) must be interpreted according to their individual purposes. Whereas Job sheds light on the proper relationship between God and people, Psalms contains a variety of purposes: lament and petition, thanksgiving and praise, exaltation of the king, and expressions of trust. These purposes must be interpreted according to each individual category within the Psalms.

At first glance, some verses in the Song of Songs may be interpreted to promote promiscuity (Song of Sg. 4:5); however, when they are interpreted
in the context of marriage, they illustrate the beauty of intimacy shared between a husband and his bride, beauty that points forward to the relationship between Christ and His church.

What about Ecclesiastes? The purpose of Ecclesiastes is to show us by negative example how best to behave. For instance, when the author says, “Everything is futile” (Eccl. 1:2), we must interpret this in light of other Scripture verses that explain the true meaning and ultimate value of living a godly life (Rom. 12:2; 15:14; Eph. 5:8; 2 Pet. 1:3-11).

Here’s the bottom line: misinterpreting wisdom literature can point us in the wrong direction, away from a life that honors and glorifies God. Jill never returned to the faith she was raised to observe…at least not yet. But who knows? Like the prodigal son who “came to his senses,” Proverbs 22:6 might just prove to be true in Jill’s case after all.

3. Interpreting Prophecy (Joel 2:28-32)

28 After this I will pour out My Spirit on all humanity; then your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will have dreams, and your young men will see visions.

29 I will even pour out My Spirit on the male and female slaves in those days.

30 I will display wonders in the heavens and on the earth: blood, fire, and columns of smoke.

31 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the great and awe-inspiring Day of the L ORD comes.

32 Then everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh will be saved, for there will be an escape for those on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, as the L ORD promised, among the survivors the L ORD calls.

On May 21, 2011, the followers of “prophet” Harold Camping turned their eyes to the skies in anticipation of the Second Coming of Jesus. These individuals had sold possessions, listed houses on the market, given large sums of money to the doomsday campaign, and even found suitable homes for beloved pets. Jesus was coming back, they believed. They had to be ready. On May 22, the “prophet” turned out to be false. But how? In his Bible, Camping had read Genesis 7:4, “Seven days from now I will make it rain on the earth,” and also 2 Peter 3:8, “With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.” From these two passages he concluded that Christ’s return would occur exactly 7,000
years after Noah’s flood (4990 B.C.). All that was left to do was the math. 
2011 + 4990 – 1 (there is no year between 1 B.C. and A.D. 1) = 7,000. 
Right? Wrong. Jesus did not return on May 21, and the false prophet 
got into hiding.

Of all the genres of Scripture, prophecy is one of the most difficult 
to understand, interpret, and apply to our lives. The first step in correctly 
interpreting prophetic literature is to seek to understand what the author 
sought to communicate to his original audience.

Sometime between 900 B.C. and 400 B.C., a massive swarm of 
locusts infiltrated Judah. We don’t know how widespread this plague 
was, but in 1889, it was recorded that one swarm of locusts crossed 
the Red Sea and covered a staggering 2,000 square miles. “The locusts 
ruled out vegetation and livestock. “Powerful and without number” (Joel 1:6), these creatures destroyed fields, devastated 
grapevines, stripped bark from trees, withered orchards, and blocked out 
the rays of the sun over the land.

Against the backdrop of this devastating plague, Joel urged God’s 
people to repent by tearing not just their clothes but also their hearts 
(2:13). “Who knows?” Joel pondered, “[God] may turn and relent and 
leave a blessing behind Him” (v. 14). And that’s exactly what happened. 
After the people of God wept, mourned, and fasted for their nation, God 
restored their land and “spared His people” (v. 18).

Read Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and 18:21-22. According to these 
Bible passages, what distinguishes a true prophet from a 
false prophet?

Foretellers and Forthtellers

By calling the nation to repent of its sin, Joel was a forthteller, that 
is, he put forth God’s truth to his own generation. But Joel and other 
prophets were also foretellers who spoke to the fulfillment of future events. 
In our passage today, Joel spoke not only to the immediate outpouring 
of God’s blessing but also to a future outpouring of God’s Spirit. “I will 
pour out My Spirit on all humanity; then your sons and your daughters 
will prophesy, your old men will have dreams, and your young men will 
see visions” (Joel 2:28). This prophecy came true hundreds of years later 
during the ministry of the apostle Peter (see Acts 2:14-21).

But Joel’s prophecy did not end with Peter at Pentecost. In fact, 
Joel 2:30-32 has yet to be fulfilled, even in our lifetime: “I will display 
wonders in the heavens and on the earth: blood, fire, and columns of 
smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before 
the great and awe-inspiring Day of the Lord comes.” Revelation 6:12 
and 8:7 suggest that these events, prophesied thousands of years ago, are 
still on the horizon.

Voices from 
the Church

“We can think of the 
prophets as preachers 
of their day, addressing 
issues of their day, who 
sometimes pointed to 
what God would do in 
the future as a part of 
their message.”

Gary Smith

When interpreting 
prophecy, these are 
some principles to keep 
in mind:

1. Seek to discover the 
original message of 
the prophet in his 
Immediate context.
2. Expect figurative 
language.
3. Be aware of themes 
in prophecy, such as a 
call to the covenant, 
to social justice, 
and for faithfulness 
from the remnant of 
God’s people.
4. Do not assume that 
all prophecy has 
been fulfilled.
5. Test modern-day 
prophesies against 
the truthfulness and 
coherency of Scripture.

More Scriptures about 
the “Day of the Lord”: 
Isaiah 2:12-21; 13:6-11
Amos 5:18-20
Matthew 24:29-31
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5
4. Interpreting Letters (Gal. 1:1-7)

1 Paul, an apostle—not from men or by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead—
2 and all the brothers who are with me:

To the churches of Galatia.

3 Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ,
4 who gave Himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.
5 To whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

6 I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from Him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—
7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to change the good news about the Messiah.

Picture yourself driving to work, not necessarily paying attention to your speed. Suddenly you see in your rearview mirror the dreaded flash of red and blue. Most of us have been in that situation. In fact, over 34 million tickets are issued each year (nearly 100,000 daily). Failure to abide by these laws contributes to over 10,000 deaths every year.

The letters (also called epistles) constitute a major section in the New Testament. Similar to an e-mail that you might write to a friend or a group of friends, each letter has a particular author and audience.

Take Galatians, for instance, written by Paul to the churches in Galatia around A.D. 50. It’s a short letter, only six chapters long. It includes an introduction, a description of Paul’s apostleship, a treatise on the relationship between grace and the law, an appeal, a thesis on what it means to be free in Jesus Christ, and a conclusion. Its primary purpose is to encourage Christians to return to the gospel that they have abandoned.

The Galatians didn’t understand how to obey the law—not the traffic law but the law of God. “I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from Him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel,” wrote Paul (1:6). That’s why Paul spent so many words explaining the importance of the law and how the law must be obeyed in relationship to the gospel of grace.

In essence, the churches in Galatia thought that simply obeying the law was enough. By going the speed limit, so to speak, they thought God would be honored with their lives and save them. What they didn’t understand was that God desires more than just outward obedience; He desires inward transformation that results in outward obedience.

Voices from the Church

“As we read the letters of the New Testament, we are hearing one end of the telephone conversation. We have Paul responding to situations or answering questions a church has asked, but often we don’t know what those situations or questions were. We need to read the New Testament letters with an ear open to the questions or historical situations being addressed.”

–Douglas Moo

When interpreting letters, these are some principles to keep in mind:

1. Seek to discover who wrote the letter.
2. Seek to discover to whom it was written and why.
3. Investigate the historical context of the audience of the letter.
4. Consider the structure, sections, main points, and themes of the letter.
5. Determine whether the passage is culturally mandated. If so, seek to understand the principles behind the passage, and apply them to your own circumstances.

What are some ways in which ancient letters are different than the letters we write today? What are some similarities? How does knowledge of ancient letter-writing help us understand the New Testament letters?
After the author, audience, and structure of an epistle are established, we can then proceed to discover its meaning for our lives. But we must do so carefully, for some teachings in the Bible are culturally mandated to specific audiences.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians 11:6, Paul writes, “If a woman’s head is not covered, her hair should be cut off.” Is the application of this text to mean that the women in our churches should wear hats to church every week or else shave their heads? Not necessarily. The church in Corinth would have understood completely that Paul was giving this instruction because prostitutes in the city of Corinth would identify themselves by displaying their long hair in public. Paul wanted to make it very clear that Christian women must act differently than the world. So the application of this passage lies in the principle behind what Paul was saying—modesty—not hair length and accessories.

Determining which texts are culturally mandated can be challenging, and Bible-loving people disagree often. Nevertheless, using this guide to escort us through Scripture as a way to understand the epistles will give greater clarity about how to apply God’s Word to your life.

Conclusion

Two men were traveling by foot from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were talking about the crucifixion of Jesus when suddenly Jesus joined them on their journey. As they walked, the conversation turned to Scripture. “Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted for them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). In essence, the great Teacher gave them a proper understanding of how God speaks through His Word.

God’s people were never meant to walk in this world alone. We are pilgrims who require God’s guidance. When it comes to interpreting the Word of God, Jesus does not leave us to ourselves. He does not want us to experience the unnecessary heartache and confusion that come from misinterpreting His words. That’s why He joins us in our pilgrimages—He escorts us to eternity—and shows us how to correctly read the Scripture. And He delights in our seeing how everything (even the strange stories of the Old Testament) is ultimately designed to lead us to Him.

If you and I allow Christ to lead us through the genres of Scripture, to guide us through the landscape of hermeneutics, then we can be confident that God will go before us, behind us, and beside us. “Remember,” Jesus said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

Pray that God will give you opportunities like Jesus had in Luke 24 to share with others the importance of interpreting the Bible in a way that honors God.

References
6. David Howard, quoted in Read the Bible for Life, 127.
9. Gary Smith, quoted in Read the Bible for Life, 137.
11. Douglas Moo, quoted in Read the Bible for Life, 195.
Devotional Material
Encourage your group to read the three devotional readings included in the personal study guide.

Study Material
- “Reading the Bible as a Guide for Life: A Conversation with David S. Dockery”—Chapter 1 from Read the Bible for Life by George H. Guthrie
- “Reading the Bible in Context: A Conversation with Andreas Köstenberger”—Chapter 2 from Read the Bible for Life by George H. Guthrie
- “What Are Some General Principles for Interpreting the Bible? (Parts 1&2)”—Chapters 10-11 from 40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible by Robert L. Plummer
- “Wisdom Literature in the Bible”—Article by Jeff S. Anderson on Biblical Illustrator Plus (CD-ROM); order at www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator

Videos
George Guthrie with Bruce Waltke: An interview about “How Do We Read the Old Testament Stories Well?”

George Guthrie with Clint Arnold: An interview about “Where Do the Letters Fit in the Story of the Bible

David Platt: “David Platt on Applying Our Lives to the Bible”

Find links to these at gospelproject.com/additionalresources

Tip of the Week
Expressing Gratitude
Organize to say “thank you” to those who would be in your group if they were not serving in another area of your church during the time you meet. Create or purchase cards to give to these volunteers; let everyone in the class sign them. As you share about the work these volunteers are doing, take the opportunity to challenge others to serve the church.