

## How to Read Narratives in the Bible

The Bible is not primarily a divine guidebook or manual for life, although much daily wisdom can be learned from this library of 66 books. ***It is God's own story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation.*** The final chapter of God's story is still being written today, even though we know how it is going to turn out in the end. We get to be part of God's story through believing in the story of Jesus and participating in the redemptive mission of God in the power of the Holy Spirit as His church.

Sometimes when you hear someone tell you a 'story' you want to know if it's a true story so you can adjust your expectations to its purpose. Although we can still learn from stories that are made-up and fictional, ***the stories in the Bible are true and based on a real world with real characters interacting with a real God.*** That's why most Bible Scholars prefer to use the word, 'narrative' instead of 'story'.

The meaning of a narrative comes from the actions of its characters. Rather than *telling* us how to live or not to live, the narrative *shows* us by the actions of its characters. (ie; Abraham shows us what living by faith and trusting in God's promises looks like). This one of the reasons the Bible is filled with narratives, or stories.

*A narrative is a story told for the purpose of conveying a message through people and their problems and situations (Roy B. Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 128).*

Biblical narratives have a specific setting, characters and a plot that communicate the larger purpose and truths of a narrative. Narratives are both historical and theological. They tell us facts about real events that took place in history and they teach us about God and His plans and purposes for His creation.

Narrative is the most common type of literature or genre in the Bible. Over 40% of the Old Testament is narrative (*Fee and Stuart, 78*). Plus large sections of the New Testament were written in the narrative genre.

**The following books were entirely or largely written in narrative form:**

Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Job, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Jonah, Haggai, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts.

## Why use Narratives to teach us about God, humanity and the world?

- Narratives appeal to a wide variety of ages.
- Narratives draw us into the story in ways we can identify with its characters.
- Narratives make it easy for us to relate to the characters and consider what we would do given a similar situation.
- Narratives are easy to remember and share with others.
- Narratives remind us that God is one of the main characters in our life story.

## Steps to Understanding Narratives in the Bible

### 1) Pick a narrative in the Bible and read it from beginning to end in one sitting.

Most of us have grown up with the Gospels or Old Testament history as isolated stories. We often do not make the connections from book to book, and from one story in the Bible to the next. And therefore we don't see the entire Bible as one continuing narrative of God and His people.

NOTE: The Story Bible (<http://www.thestory.com>) is an excellent resource for this purpose. Why not make it a goal to read through the Story Bible once each year?

### 2) Keep the purpose of the human authors in mind when reading the narrative.

Biblical narratives were written by divinely inspired authors who had a purpose in writing their narratives.

Example 1: John explicitly states that the reason he wrote his gospel was so that his readers might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (see John 20:31).

Example 2: Matthew wrote to show that Jesus was the promised king of Israel.

### 3) Learn about the place or setting of the biblical narrative.

Have a good understanding of the historical-cultural context. Get familiar with the cultural and geographical surroundings in the narrative. You may want to consult a good Bible Commentary to help with this.

### 4) Remember narratives are stories about God and how he works through people.

God is the hero of all biblical narratives. Even in the book of Esther where God's name is never mentioned by name, God is the hero behind the scenes. He preserved his people from destruction, thus keeping His promise that His people Israel would never be destroyed.

## **5) The purpose of narratives is not to teach doctrines.**

Instead of teaching doctrine explicitly and directly like New Testament epistles, biblical narratives illustrate what is taught in other portions of Scripture.

Example 1: When Joseph ran away from Potiphar's wife who wanted to commit adultery with him, he illustrated the principle of "flee from idolatry" (1 Cor. 10:14).

Example 2: In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down before the image of gold and thus illustrated the principle of "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod. 20:3).

Keep in mind, that the main points of biblical narratives is not to highlight people like Joseph; it is to show the greatness of God as He worked in the lives of people like Joseph.

## **6) Biblical narratives do not always tell us the good things we should do.**

Except for some rare exceptions like Joshua, Daniel and Jesus, most major biblical characters are shown to have serious flaws. Samson was carnal; David committed adultery; Elijah retreated as a coward from Jezebel; Abraham lied when he said that his wife was his sister; Jacob deceived his father for the birthright.

*Sometimes even elements like prayers are negative models and represent how people should NOT approach God.*

\*\* It is a good principle not to apply directly what a Bible character did unless another passage of Scripture explicitly says to do such a thing.

*"Narratives record what actually happened, not what should have happened or what ought to have happened. "Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story" (Fee and Stuart, 84).*

## **Sources used to develop these guidelines, and for further reading:**

Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth, Zondervan, 1982  
Michael Vlach, Interpreting the Narrative Portions of Scripture, 2012  
Leland Ryken, How to Read the Bible As Literature, Zondervan, 1984  
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Roy B. Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, Cook Communications, 2002