

LESSON 3
Principles for Understanding Scripture (2)

Background Information for the Teacher

Objectives:

1. The student can explain the meaning of the word "genre" and what it means in biblical interpretation.
2. The student can list at least five different genre used in Scripture.
3. The student can name at least one principle that will assist in interpreting each of the different genre.
4. The student can describe how to approach the structure of a passage based on its genre.

Preparation:

1. Have copies of Written Review No. 2 to hand out at the beginning of class.
2. Have Bibles and pens as needed.
3. Have copies of Worksheet No. 3 for students to use during this lesson.
4. Have a chalkboard or overhead projector on which to display key words, ideas, and Scriptures.
5. Be prepared to discuss what we learn from our study of conditions and Obadiah.

Theme:

This lesson will help students understand how two additional principles, genre and context, can help us understand Bible passages.

Lesson Plan for Conducting the Class

Introduction: (10 minutes)

1. Call the roll and make arrangements to contact those who are missing.
2. Make any necessary announcements.
3. Have a prayer and songs as desired.
4. Check the answers to Written Review No. 2. The answers for that written review are: 1—conditions. 2—situation, history, geography, archaeology, and culture. You can let a few students give their scripture citation. Encourage all to be participating in getting good notes during class, reviewing them, and then checking themselves with the written review each time.

Learning Experiences: (about 30 minutes)

1. In our last lesson we studied about the first of our ten principles for understanding Scripture: conditions. As an assignment, we asked for you to look at the book of



Obadiah. As I call the name of each of the five elements of conditions, tell me something that element reveals about the book of Obadiah. (Hopefully your students will have learned some of the following through their study.)

Situation. Judah has been taken captive and Edom has been happy about it. Probably this was after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. History. The trouble between Jews and Edomites goes back to Jacob, father of Israel, and Esau, father of Edom. Long-standing feud. Edom would not let Israel cross its land. (Numbers 20:21). David subdued them (2 Samuel 8:13-14). They revolted (2 Kings 8:20-22). Geography. The land of the Edomites was in the mountains around the city of Petra. Remember the movie "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" as they went through that long break between the rocks and came out facing a building carved into the perpendicular cliff wall. That is the entrance to the ancient city of the Edomites although the building itself was carved by the Nabateans after they conquered the Edomites. Verse 3 makes reference to their mountain hide-out as it speaks of those who "live in the clefts of the rock" and who set their nest in the stars. Living in a place protected by such natural defenses had given them a false sense of security, particularly about what the God of the Jews could do to them. Archaeology. The ruins in and around the ancient city of Petra, probably called in the Bible by the name Sela or Teman, reveal much about the Edomites. They had altars on top of their mountains and strong defenses but, as Obadiah predicted, but this site today is desolate. As a people they were conquered by the Nabateans and were intermingled with them so that no Edomites remained. Just as Obadiah said, "they will be cut off forever" (v. 10). Culture. The Edomites worshipped an array of pagan gods. They had a rather high standing among nations because they controlled caravan routes and were able to charge those who crossed their territory. They were also a trading center. Their culture also included a strong hatred of the Jews and, because of this, they "gloated" over the fall of the Jews. But, says Obadiah, God will bring them down and Mount Zion will eventually triumph over the mountain of Esau (vss. 17, 19). (Teacher: the point here is to let the class experience the fun of looking up information about Scripture and seeing how it will illuminate their studies. Be sure they get to sense this.)

2. Today we add another element of Understanding Scripture: "genre" (pronounced "johnre"). This is a term used in literature to indicate different types of literature: poetry, drama, novel, short story, etc. As one reads or studies these different genre, he/she should approach the selection according to its type. If you are going to a movie, for example, you like to get in the proper frame of mind for the genre of that movie. If it is science fiction—like Star Wars—



you come ready for action and thrills. If, on the other hand, you are going to see *Sleepless in Seattle*, you would be ready for a different genre—romance.

3. **Q:** What are some of the different types of literature God has chosen to use in the sixty-six books of the Bible: **A:** Poetry, Narrative/History, Epistle, Prophecy, Law, Proverbs, Sermon, Apocalypse. (Get a list something like this one on the board.) Of course, some books make use of several of these genre in the same book.
4. Let's look briefly at some of these genre, asking how our approach to each might be a little different.
 - a. Poetry. We may define poetry as writing that uses imagination, figures of speech and some time of rhythmic structure. **Q:** Where in the Bible would we find the most poetry? **A:** Psalms, Song of Solomon. **Q:** What special features of poetry might be helpful to us as we seek to understand it? **A:** More emotion, more imagination. Often uses figures of speech. In Hebrew poetry, the second line often repeats the meaning of the previous one with somewhat different words. We need to think of the poetry's primary use—a song for worship, a meditation, a reading. Look at Psalm 19:1. **Q:** What do you see in this verse that corresponds with the characteristics we have listed? **A:** Emotion. Repetition of the meaning of the first line by the second line. Figures of speech because inanimate objects are said to speak. Probably a song for public worship.
 - b. Narrative/history. Much of the Bible is in this style which tells a story. **Q:** Can you name some books that are primarily narrative? **A:** Genesis, Exodus, Matthew, Acts, and many more. Sometimes biography is listed as a separate category. We are attracted to stories, remember them better, and use them as a primary method of teaching. God has also used this method. **Q:** What are some things to remember about understanding narrative? **A:** The value of the story is usually not in the details but in the overall impact. Stories make their point less directly than law but still have a message to give. The narrative often has an emotional element with which we can identify. The structure in narrative/history is usually a chronological set of sequential events. The narrative will often have elements of drama such as a conflict or problem and how that matter is resolved. Daniel and the Lions Den, for example, or Noah and the flood or the crucifixion. Recognize the purpose of the story: to convey a moral lesson, a lesson about character, a lesson about a doctrinal truth, a lesson about



relationships, a message about the character of God, or a story to tell of some significant event in God's plan of salvation. Particularly if God or inspired leaders have acted in the narrative, then we are expected to use the case as something from which to draw conclusions. We need to note the story's time period so we know to which of God's covenants we should connect it.

Look at the story of the thief on the cross in Luke 23:39-43. **Q:** At the time of this story, what covenant of God were the people living under? **A:** The Mosaic Covenant. **Q:** What is the message we are to get from this story? **A:** That in the midst of all the criticisms hurled His way as He was on the cross, at least one person believed in Him and was rewarded. **Q:** Is this story included to show us how we should be saved under the Covenant of Christ? **A:** No. During Jesus' life, He had power to grant forgiveness as He chose such as with the man let down through the roof. He left instructions to be given after His death, however, about how one could be saved under the New Covenant. **Q:** Are there stories in the Bible to show us how to be saved? **A:** Yes. The conversion stories in Acts. These tell how the message of salvation was preached after the death of Jesus. There is no indication that anyone in the Christian age took the thief's case as a basis of how to have sins forgiven.

- c. Epistle. We may define epistle as a letter an inspired writer sends to one or a group to convey instruction, deal with a problem, and/or establish a relationship. **Q:** What are some books we would classify as epistles? **A:** All of Paul's writings and others as well. Look at Revelation 2 and 3 and note there are seven epistles from Jesus in these two chapters. **Q:** What are some principles we should remember when reading epistles? **A:** That they are usually written to deal with a particular situation and we need to understand the epistle in light of those circumstances. The more we know of the background of the situation the more likely we are to understanding the meaning of the epistle. There are personal elements to an epistle we should recognize. Epistles often have a structure we need to recognize as they move from point to point. Usually the structure of an epistle is characteristic of letters of that time: salutation including the name of the ones addressed and the writer, the message of the epistle, and the close often with personal comments. The content portion of the epistle, particularly if lengthy, will be structured in a way that the author can best



convey the message. It is very important to determine the organization of his points in order to grasp his meaning. Then each portion of the content section can be studied within the organization of the whole. We can make applications of the teachings in the epistles to the extent we have similar circumstances to deal with. Some have called the epistles "love letters" and have concluded that there are no instructions or commands in them to be obeyed. This would be counter to the nature of many of the epistles and certainly counter to what Paul wrote in an epistle to the Thessalonians: 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15.

- d. Prophecy. Books of prophecy usually partake of two elements: forthtelling and foretelling. That is, the prophet often brings a message for the particular time and place in which he lives. He preaches a sermon. Sometimes the prophets also reveal what will happen at some future time. As we approach prophetic literature, we need to note which mode the prophet in when we are studying his message. The structure of a prophecy will depend on the nature of the message and will vary widely among prophetic sections. Some prophecies are organized around the nations being mentioned, some around events being foretold, some around current events. Determining the structure of the prophecy, however, is a very important part of its study. **Q:** While there are prophecies that occur in many books of the Bible, what are some books you would consider to be primarily prophecy? **A:** Revelation, most of the minor prophets, much of the books of the major prophets, sometimes in the psalms, sometimes in the gospels as Jesus prophecies. Often prophecies are mixed in with other genre in the same book. Open your Bibles to the book of Daniel. Let's look at each chapter to see what genre that chapter is. **Q:** What is chapter 1? **A:** Narrative. **Q:** Chapter 2? **A:** Narrative and prophecy. **Q:** Chapter 3? **A:** Narrative. **Q:** Chapter 4? **A:** Narrative and prophecy. **Q:** Chapter 5? **A:** Narrative and prophecy? **Q:** Chapter 6? **A:** Narrative. **Q:** Chapter 7? **A:** Prophecy. **Q:** Chapter 8? **A:** Prophecy. **Q:** Chapter 9? **A:** Narrative and prophecy? **Q:** Chapter 10? **A:** Narrative. **Q:** Chapters 11 and 12? **A:** Prophecy.
- e. Law. This would include statements of direct commandments and passages that are primarily instructive about what God expects of us. **Q:** What are some examples of this type of passage? **A:** Parts of Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy. Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Passages in Paul's



epistles that give direct instructions to be obeyed. Galatians 6:2 speaks of fulfilling the "law of Christ," so there is "law" included in the teaching of Christ as well as in the Old Testament. Sometimes the structure of law is just a list of commandments. Sometimes it states some general topic and then gives a number of commands about that theme. Sometimes it is organized around different moral issues. **Q:** How do we approach such passages? **A:** First to know to whom the command was given and the situation in which it is to be obeyed. Then we seek to ask the way in which that command would be applied to us, if at all. **Q:** What is a command in the Bible that we think we should not follow today? **A:** Build an ark or something similar. **Q:** What is a commandment that we should follow today? **A:** (Something like the following may be suggested.) Make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18). Repent and be baptized for remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Do not show partiality (James 2:1).

- f. Proverbs. **Q:** What is a proverb? **A:** A short, memorable statement usually summarizing a truth about human experience. **Q:** What is some non-biblical proverb you know? **A:** "A stitch in time saves nine" or "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," or any of a hundred others. In understanding a proverb in the Bible, we need to remember two or three things. (1) A proverb states what is usually true but there may be exceptions. (2) A proverb is not a command but an encouragement to a particular action. (3) In the book of Proverbs, many of the proverbs are in double statements with the second half either echoing the first half or presenting the opposite. Have someone read Proverbs 22:6. **Q:** Is it usually true that a child raised in the way he should go will stay with that lifestyle? **A:** Yes. **Q:** Are there exceptions? **A:** Yes. We have all seen a child that apparently was raised right who turned wrong. **Q:** Does this mean the Bible was wrong? **A:** No. This is a proverb and must be understood as a statement of what is generally true. When studying the genre of proverbs, then, we must understand the nature of this kind of statement. **Q:** Are there proverbs in the Bible outside of the book of Proverbs? **A:** Yes. John 1:46 would seem to be an example of a common saying in Jesus' day. And there many other proverbs in the Bible.
- g. Sermon. Many books of the Bible contain sermons although none is entirely of this genre. Many of the books of Old Testament prophets contain sermons they preached. The gospels contain sermons or



public discourses of Jesus and Acts provides sermons by Peter and Paul. To study this genre, we must look at the occasion to learn who is speaking, to whom he is speaking, and what is the nature of the problem or need being addressed. We should look outline the sermon to find the major points and how they are developed. We should also look for the ways the speaker is seeking to inform or persuade the audience to come to a certain conclusion or action. We can also assess the outcome of the sermon. **Q:** What are some sermons in the Bible?

A: Sermon on the Mount, Peter on Pentecost, Paul on Mars Hill, Amos to the people of Samaria.

- h. Apocalypse. Apocalypse is a genre in which the author is usually given a vision, uses highly figurative language often involving animals and other features of nature, uses numbers in a figurative way, and speaks about some coming event that will seriously affect one or more nations. To interpret the apocalypse, one will usually look for the clues given to identify the characters involved, such as who the various animals or other features represent. Any other factors that can be identified in a general overview of the passage should be noted. Then the student may start through the apocalypse with those identifications in mind. The apocalypse is usually structured around the elements or events in the vision. Often it is in a story form which provides for a progression of events. **Q:** What are some apocalyptic passages in the Bible? Passages in Daniel and Ezekiel would be of this type as would the book of Revelation.
5. So the point is that as we read different parts of the Bible, we need to ask what type of literature we are studying. Different genre require a somewhat different approach. Some have taken this good point to an extreme, however, suggesting that there are no commands in epistles or any absolute truths to be gained from a narrative. Let's use the point about genre to help us come to a better understanding of all Scripture but let's not push it too far and fail to get from God's message what He intended.

Application: (3 minutes)

1. Back to Obadiah. **Q:** What is the basic message Obadiah was giving? **A:** Those who are proud and think they can prevail over God and His people will be brought down and destroyed. **Q:** What genre is Obadiah? **A:** Prophecy. **Q:** Can you think of a passage that gives this same message in a different genre? **A:** Proverbs 16:18—pride goes before a fall (a proverb); Galatians 6:7—what you sow you will reap (epistle); 1 Corinthians 10:12—let the one who stands be



careful lest he fall (epistle); 1 Peter 5:5—God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (epistle but written much like a proverb). So God has used various genre to reveal the same basic message.

2. The lesson of humility is a good one for all of us—not just for the ancient Edomites.

Assignment: (2 minutes)

1. Use the attached worksheet to prepare for the “written review” over genre next week. Be ready to list several types of genre and to mention at least one thing we have learned about how to learn from each type.



**UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE
WORKSHEET NO. 3**

The first principle for understanding the Bible is _____.

The second principle for understanding the Bible is _____.

Genre means a _____ of _____.

In the space by each number below, write the name of a genre studied, a book of the Bible that represents that type of genre, and at least one principle we should keep in mind when studying that type of genre.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

