

Fishing Tips Part IX
Galatians
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Introduction

This will be the ninth sermon in our present series on biblical interpretation. I have titled this series *Fishing Tips* in light of the ancient Chinese proverb; “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” It is my contention that the people of God ought to be taught basic, common-sense principles of how to read the Bible with accuracy so that they might learn to feed upon Christ through His word without having an infantile dependency upon others for doing so. The series has been titled *Fishing Tips* because it is my attempt at providing you broad principles of biblical interpretation so that you might feast upon Christ through His word on your own; so that you may be able to feed yourself ‘for a lifetime.’

Last week I presented an outline of our present series on biblical interpretation which brings a unified understanding of where everything that I have presented thus far fits in regard to the overall flow of the series. I would like to draw your attention to it again this week. As you will remember, the series really comes in four sections, as seen below.

Section 1: Biblical Considerations: The Relevance of Biblical Interpretation for the Average Joe

- The Relevance of Biblical Interpretation for All Christians (Part I): Hebrews 3:12-13
- The Relevance of Biblical Interpretation for All Christians (Part II): 1 Peter 2:2-3
- The Relevance of Biblical Interpretation for All Christians (Part III): Ephesians 6:3; Deuteronomy 6:4-6
- The Relevance of Biblical Interpretation for All Christians (Part IV): Colossians 3:16

Section 2: Foundational Considerations: The Nature of Biblical Interpretation

- We are all Interpreters
- The Nature of the Bible: God’s Perfect Word Given to Us in Our Language
- Interpret First: Application Flows out of Interpretation
- Interpret First: Discover the Original Intention of the Author

Section 3: Practical Considerations: The How of Biblical Interpretation

- Practice
- Consider the Genre: Comics and Obituaries
- Consider the Literary Context: Getting the Big Picture (Hovering)
- Consider the Historical Context:
- Consider the Biblical Context

Section 4: Application-based Considerations: Moving From Text to Today

- Applying the Text with Accuracy: Contextualization
- A Case Study

Thus far we have established the biblical relevance for a series on biblical interpretation for the average joe in the pew, we have discussed some foundational considerations about biblical interpretation, and we are now in the process of discussing how to actually go about the task of

interpretation. In the second section of the series (foundational considerations) we concluded that interpretation primarily has to do with discovering the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author. In this third section of the series (our present section) we are asking the question, “How do we discover the original intention of the author?”

So far we have determined that the way in which we go about discovering the original intention of the author is by practicing, considering the genre (genre = sort or kind) of literature that we are dealing with, considering the literary context (getting the big picture/hovering), and last week we began to discuss the importance of considering the historical context. Once again, the reason we are answering these questions (questions of genre, literary context, and historical context) is because answering these questions are necessary to discovering the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author of the Scriptures.

Consider the Historical Context

Recap

Last week I presented three concepts for us to consider regarding how to and how not to approach and use the historical/cultural data of the Bible. Let me remind you of those three statements before we continue our discussion. First, one does not need a knowledge of the historical/cultural context for either a basic understand the Gospel or for a basic understanding of the character of God. However, as established last week, this does not mean that gaining an understanding of the historical/cultural context of the Scriptures is unimportant; I merely say this to establish the an acquisition of such knowledge is not essential for salvation. Second, our approach to the word of God should be consistent with the way in which God has revealed Himself. How has God revealed Himself in His word? In real space/time history; He who is above time has entered into time, time and again, to speak to humans in their own language. Our approach to the Scriptures should be consistent with this fact. Third, a knowledge of the historical/cultural backgrounds of the scriptures should not be pursued as an end in itself. The ultimate end of acquiring a knowledge of the historical/cultural background of the Scriptures is to bring greater clarity to our understanding of the Scriptures. Many, however, merely pursue it as an object of interest. From my vantage point, however, biblical backgrounds is only helpful in so far as it helps us better understand the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author(s) of the text of Scripture.

Asking the Right Questions

This morning I want to discuss how one actually goes about studying the historical/cultural background of the Scriptures. I am thoroughly convinced that the reason so many are so afraid of biblical backgrounds is because they have not been taught how to ask the right questions. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart hit the nail on the head when they suggest that “[t]he secret lies in learning to ask the right questions of the text.”¹ I cannot stress enough the importance of learning how to ask the right questions when it comes to studying the historical/cultural context of the Scriptures. Learning to ask the right sort of questions is half the battle.

I am of the school that says that there are no stupid questions. Asking questions is extremely important, however it ought to be our goal to be the sort of people who ask g the best questions. I cannot tell you how many times someone has come up to me with this sort of

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 15.

question; “Jimmy, I was reading about Jesus washing the disciples feet and I was just blown away by the fact that Jesus humbled Himself to wash even Judas’ feet. But I was wondering... how long were the disciples toe nails?” I have never personally been asked this questions, but I have fielded many questions that are similar to this question. Here’s another example, someone may come up to me with their Bible opened to Galatians 1 and ask, “Jimmy, I was reading here in Galatians 1 and I came across Paul’s words in 1:17; now, where was Arabia and what did Paul eat while he was there?” I do not want any of you to be afraid to ask me questions, but generally whenever I get asked such questions my knee jerk reaction is to answer their question by asking, “Let me ask you a more important question; ‘What was Paul’s primary purpose in writing Galatians?’”

Here’s the deal, how much insight will knowing the length of the disciples toe nails bring to the text of John 13? It is not that that question is not be worthy of consideration; it is just that there are better immediate questions that will bring greater clarity to the clear sense of Jesus’ exemplary service in John 13. And how much insight will knowing the cuisine of Arabia be in bringing greater clarity to the Spirit’s original intention in Galatians 1? Here’s the problem, the majority of Christians see questions of biblical backgrounds to be interesting as opposed to being necessary. What I am interested in is asking questions which will bring the greatest amount of light to the greatest number of passages as possible. In the same way that many Christians dive right in to Galatians 1:1 and try to squeeze every ounce of truth out of it before getting the big picture, many Christians ask highly specific questions of the historical or cultural backgrounds of the Bible before first asking the big picture questions of historical backgrounds.

Here is my concern; if you begin your study of the historical/cultural backgrounds of the Bible by dabbling in the minutia, answering highly specified questions that only bring clarity to one or two or three verses, you will not see the relevance for biblical backgrounds (because you will not see how greatly it can impact your reading of the Scriptures) and you will end up getting lost in the details (unless you are a nerd or a genius, of course).

It reminds me of parents telling their child, “Here’s is \$10, spend it wisely.” You see, most of us are too busy to be spending your time asking and answering super specific questions that will only affect your ability to better understand one, two, or three passages. This is why so many Christians are afraid of biblical backgrounds; they are already too busy with work, the kids, the yard, sports, fixing the leaky faucet, fixing the brakes on the car, etc. You barely already have enough time to squeeze in 10 minutes worth of bible study on a daily basis. Surely, it may be interesting to entertain some specific questions of background—sometimes it is essential that you do so. But *here is the bottom line: you want to get the biggest bang for your buck. The goal is to ask the sort of questions which will bring the most clarity to the greatest number of passages.* You may know quite a lot about head coverings and what sort of a role they played in the culture of the day, but how many passages will you be able to understand with great clarity because of your detailed understanding of head coverings?

I am sure that you are now waiting with baited breath for me to lay forth for you some questions which you should ask of the Scriptures. I am going to list for you 6 questions having to do with biblical backgrounds that I have found to be extremely useful in bringing clarity in regard to understanding what the Spirit meant when He said what He said in any given passage. The ordering of the questions do not reveal any superiority of importance.

6 Important Questions

1. What was the current political situation at the time of the writing of this book? (Who were the rulers at the time; did they rule with force or diplomatically; what was the economic situation; how the political situation affect the people of God; how did the political establishment think of and react to God's present work in the world?) This question will help you as you read, primarily, the prophets, minor prophets, the Gospels, and Acts. You can find information regarding the political situation in some of the better study bibles (especially the ESV Study Bible), in any good commentary, or in any good bible dictionary.

2. What was the current religious situation at the time of writing? (what were the most influential religions or religious sects at the time; in what ways were they different from and in what ways were they are similar to Biblical religion; how did the different religions and religious sects react to God's at-that-time present work in the world). This question will help you as you read, primarily, the prophets, minor prophets, the Gospels, and Acts. You can find information regarding the religious situation in some of the better study bibles (especially the ESV Study Bible), in any good commentary, or in any good bible dictionary.

3. Who wrote this book or letter? This may not seem like a historical question, but it is. For example, Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatians; Paul was a real historical person and at a real point in time Paul sat down and wrote the letter to the Galatians.

4. To whom was this book or letter was written? You may remember that I preached 2 sermons on 1 Thessalonians a few months ago (during the holiday season). How much insight did a knowledge of who the Thessalonians were bring to the text of 1 Thessalonians. If you remember, the Thessalonians were brand spanking new believers and because intense persecution had come to Thessalonica almost immediately after they had come to faith in Christ Paul and his missionary team had to leave them in Thessalonica by themselves as young fledgling believers. Understanding the audience of a book or letter can bring great clarity to the clear meaning of the text—it certainly does in 1 Thessalonians. You can learn about the people to whom the letter was written by reading the book itself, or by reading the notes in any good study bible or by reading the introduction to any good commentary.

5. What was the occasion of the letter or book? In other words, what was the historical situation that necessitated the writing of this letter or book? It is imperative that you do not confuse the occasion of the letter or book with the purpose of the letter or book. The difference between the two will become clear as we move along. I will be using Paul's Letter to the Galatians as an example when it comes to determining the occasion and purpose of a book or letter. So, what was the occasion of Paul's Letter to the Galatians; what was the historical situation which necessitated Paul to write this letter to the churches in the Galatian province? As can be clearly seen from Galatians 1:6-9 and 3:1-5 false teachers had infiltrated the church and had undermined the doctrines of justification and sanctification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Galatians 1:6-9: 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 gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, a curse be on him! ⁹ As we have said before, I now say again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse be on him!

Galatians 3:1-3: ¹ You foolish Galatians! Who has hypnotized you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified? ² I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now going to be made complete by the flesh?

These false teachers were causing great division in the church. When Paul got word that such damage was being done in the church of Galatia he sat down and said, “Hmm... that sounds bad, I had better write a letter to them to help them fix these problems.” What, then, was the occasion of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, what was the situation that made Paul sit back and say, “I had better write them a letter?!” It was the infiltration of false teachers into the church who were teaching a false Gospel.

You can figure out the occasion of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians by asking the following question; “What was going on in the churches of Galatia that drove Paul to write a letter to them?” Or, ‘What was the historical situation in Galatia that necessitated the writing of this letter by Paul?’ Answering this question will bring much clarity and understanding to the book or letter which you are reading. First of all, it will help you to see that the books and letters of the Bible are not detached from the pain of this world, but rather are born out of the brokenness of this world—they are written to confront the fallenness of this world with the truth of Gospel of Jesus Christ. And second, you will see that reading any given book or letter will turn that book or letter into a real, living drama.

6. What was the purpose of the letter or book? In other words, what was the author’s aim; what was his overarching goal in writing this letter or book? Using Galatians again as our example, we will ask, “What was Paul’s purpose for writing this letter to the Galatian churches?” Well, we know that the occasion for writing was that false teachers had infiltrated the churches of Galatia and were teaching a different Gospel than what they had been taught. The false teachers were dragging the believers into their heresy with them and were causing all sorts of division in the church. The church was falling apart in every sense of the word because of the damaging effects of the errant message and because of the lives of the false teachers. Now that we have established the occasion of Galatians we will ask the ‘why’ question of Galatians; in other words, what was Paul’s purpose in writing this letter to the Galatians? You will find that Paul’s purpose in writing Galatians was really threefold: 1. he wrote to discredit the false teachers by exposing the faulty foundations of their false Gospel, 2. he wrote to reestablish the biblical Gospel, and 3. he wrote to warn the believers in Galatia to neither embrace the false Gospel of the false teachers nor to model their behavior. Observe the text with me. You can see these elements all throughout Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Observe his purpose with me by looking at Galatians 5:1-3 and 6:13-15

He wrote to warn them to not embrace the false Gospel: “¹ Christ has liberated us into freedom. Therefore stand firm and don’t submit again to a yoke of slavery. ² Take note! I, Paul, tell you that if you get circumcised, Christ will not benefit you at all. ³ Again I testify to every man who gets circumcised that he is obligated to keep the entire law.” (Galatians 5:1-3)

He wrote to establish the biblical Gospel: “¹³ For even the circumcised don’t keep the law themselves; however, they want you to be circumcised in order to boast about your flesh.

¹⁴ But as for me, I will never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; [what matters] instead is a new creation.” (Galatians 6:13-15)

Summing Up

I believe that if you focus on the big picture historical questions, the 6 laid forth above, you will be greatly served. *How many passages will you be able to understand with greater clarity if you come to a basic knowledge of the occasion and purpose of Paul’s letter to the Galatians?* I can guarantee you that a basic knowledge of these two historical realities will aid you in better understanding every single verse in the entire letter of Galatians. We generally spend our time asking the specific questions that bring greater clarity to one or two passages; but when we ask the right questions we put ourselves in a position where we are able to understand a greater number of passages with clarity. Remember, *the goal is to ask the sort of questions which will bring the most clarity to the greatest number of passages.*

The goal is to become familiar enough with the basics of the historical context that you begin to ***read visually***. You want to read it in the same way that you read a novel—you read it as if it were a drama, a story of redemption and the triumph of the Gospel in a fallen world as it unfolded in the ancient world (or, to be more specific, as it unfolded in Galatia). You want to read it as if you were a fly on the wall in Paul’s shop as he painfully and tearfully wrote to the deceived brethren in Galatia. You want to read it as if you were a fly on the wall in the church of Galatia, watching the drama of the battle for the biblical Gospel unfold before your eyes.

A book that I want to recommend to you all, because of its superb scholarship and excellent, down-to-earth writing style is Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuarts book *How to Read the Bible Book By Book*. This book gives a brief explanation of these important historical factors for each book of the Bible.

Conclusion

It really is a tragedy that the historical background of the scriptures has come to be seen as something only for the scholars in the seminaries. One of the things that breaks my heart is that the scholars in the seminaries write their biblical background books back and forth to each other instead of writing them to the people of God—to help the average joe in the pew get a better grasp at reading the word of God in context (in its literary and historical context). In order to discover the original intention of the Spirit in the text of Scripture you must consider the culture in which it was written. I would also commend to you the two volumes put out by Gary Burge in the new “Ancient Context, Ancient Faith” series, *The Bible and the Land* and *Jesus, the Middle Eastern Storyteller*. Burge, Stuart, and Fee have really done the church a great service by making the fruits of their labor accessible to average joe in the pew.

Next week we will be discussing the importance of reading the Bible in its biblical context.