

Fishing Tips Part VIII
Jeremiah 29:11
Jimmy Snowden

Introduction

This will be our eighth 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.’

Thus far we have considered two foundational realities of interpretation: 1. we are all interpreters and 2. the Bible is interpretable, and four basic principles of interpretation: 1. practice, 2. get the big picture, 3. interpret first: application flows out of interpretation, 4. interpret first: discover the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author, and 5. consider the genre. This morning I will be laying forth one new principle of interpretation for us to consider.

Making Sense of the Series

Before actually discussing our fifth principle of biblical interpretation I would like to lay out for you the logical flow of where we have come. As all of you know, this sermon series has ended up being way more involved than I first planned. I was thinking that the series would only be 2-3 weeks long (4 at the most). Considering the fact that this is already the eight sermon in the series (with at least two more to go), things did not quite pan out the way I expected. Because this series became more involved than at first planned I feel the need to explain for you the overarching big picture of how everything that has been said thus far fits together. In the first sermon you will remember that we discussed the principles of ‘Practice’ and of ‘Getting the Big Picture.’ In this sermon, we discussed the concept of ‘hovering’, and of working from generals to specifics as opposed to working from specifics to generals. I preached this in the first week of the series with the understanding that I was not going to be doing a thorough study on the topic of biblical interpretation, but since that first week the series has developed into something much larger than a skim-the-surface-of-biblical-interpretation study. I do not regret this; in fact, I am glad that the series has become much more involved than I had planned at first. However, since I did not intend for this series to become what it has become, the first sermon sort of threw the overall logical flow of the series off a bit.

Because of this, I have developed a ‘big picture’ outline of the overall flow of the series. What you will see is that I have organized the series into four sections: 1. Biblical Considerations: The Relevance of Series on Biblical Interpretation for the Average Joe, 2. Foundational Considerations: The Nature of Biblical Interpretation, 3. Practical Considerations: The How of Biblical Interpretation, and 4. Application-based Considerations: Moving From the Text to Today. Here is what each of the three section consist of:

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

Really, the only problem with the way in which I approached this is that I discussed “Practice” and “Consider the Literary Context: Getting the Big Picture” in the first section (it was actually preached in the first sermon of the series) as opposed to discussing it in the third section. Considering the logical flow of this series, I should be speaking about considering the literary context this morning. The reason it should be talked about this morning is because it is one of the ways in which you, the reader, uncovers the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author. Nonetheless, God is sovereign in these things. So, in a perfect world, this morning I would be dealing with the importance of considering the literary context of a passage, but since I have already dealt with that we will skip it and move on to the next principle of biblical interpretation, which is “Consider the Historical Context.”

Overview of Last Week: Consider the Genre

Last week we discussed the fact that the first step in the process of discovering the original intention of the author is to consider the genre. The fact is that you cannot discover what a text means if you are unaware of the sort of type of literature that you are dealing with. Different types (or genres) of literature are meant to be read differently. The fact is that you approach different types of literature with completely different interpretive tools, and that is why you don't laugh as hard when you read the obituaries as when you read the comics. Here is the bottom line; many people miss the original intention of the Spirit-inspired author in any given text because they do not approach the text as it is meant to be approached. I likened different genres of literature to different types of vehicles; for example, a logging truck has certain capabilities that a nascar does not have because it is built differently, and vice versa. If you were to force your logging truck to fulfill the same function that a nascar does, you will have yourself a completely wrecked up logging truck. And why? Because a logging truck is not built to go 200

mph around a track. Well, the Bible is full of all sorts of genres of literature, and each genre must be approached differently. The first question you must ask when you approach any given text is this, “What sort of literature am I dealing with here?”

I am sure that some of you left last week thinking, “Jimmy, this is really interesting. It is interesting to know that the Bible is written in so many different genres. But, honestly, I had no clue that the Bible was comprised of so many different types of literature, and I especially didn’t realize that each different sort of literature was meant to be interpreted differently. So, Jimmy, how can I learn more about the different types of literature in the Bible; I mean, where do you find out about this stuff?” This is an excellent question. I would like to commend a certain book to each and everyone here this morning. It is titled *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart. Not only is this book a top notch work of scholarship, but it is written in the vernacular of the average joe. Fee and Stuart essentially go throughout the Bible and explain all the major genres of literature, providing principles on how to and how not to approach each of the different types of literature in the Bible. If I were to make a list of the top five most important books for all Christians to read, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* would be in that list without a doubt.

Consider the Literary Context: Getting the Big Picture

As you will see on the outline above, *Consider the Literary Context: Getting the Big Picture*” is under *Consider the Genre*. If I had not already dealt with the topic of getting the big picture the first week of the series, I would be discussing it right here. However, since I already dealt with this the first week of the series, I will not be discussing it here. And thus, we will be moving right along to the next principle of Biblical Interpretation, *Consider the Historical Context*.

Consider the Historical/Cultural Context

The question which this third section is asking is, “Now that I know that discovering the original intention of the author is essentially what biblical interpretation is concerned with, how in the world do I go about discovering the original intention of the author—how do I go about interpreting a passage with accuracy?” Thus far I have given 3 practical tips for how to discover the original intention of the authors of the Scriptures: 1. Practice, 2. Consider the Genre, and 3. Consider the Literary Context. In other words, *Consider the Historical Context* is the fourth practical tip for discovering the original intention of the Spirit in any given text in the Bible with accuracy.

There are so many things that need to be discussed in this section primarily because the issue of the historical and cultural context of the Scriptures is seen to be a big, scary, hairy monster by most Christians. It seems that there are generally three ways in which Christians relate to the historical background of the Bible; 1. people are either so intimidated by it that they completely neglect it or 2. they understand the importance of biblical background but have no clue where to look or how to get such knowledge 3. or they dig in so deep that they end up getting lost in all the data, which more often than not results in mudding the clear meaning of the text of Scripture. In our discussion of the historical background of the Bible I want to emphasize the fact that biblical backgrounds are not beyond you if you approach them correctly.

This morning I simply want to make three general statements about the historical context of the Scriptures and then I am going to demonstrate for you from Jeremiah 29:11 how much an

understanding of the historical/cultural context of a certain passage can affect the way in which you interpret a text.

3 General Statements

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. How many of you reading this had a stellar understanding of the ancient world when you came to Christ? Probably very few of you. I myself can say that I was a Christian for many years before I had any sort of a useable knowledge of the ancient world. Nonetheless, I knew the basics of the Gospel well and had a basic, yet acceptable, understanding of the nature of God.

You may be asking; “Why then, Jimmy, would you put such a large emphasis on the historical and cultural background of the Bible if it is not essential to gaining an acceptable and accurate understanding of God and the Gospel?” This is the completely wrong question to ask. It like saying, “Jimmy, why would you recommend me to look at the moon through this telescope here when I can view it with perfect clarity through my binoculars?” This is exactly what makes American Christianity so repulsive; if we don’t *need* it, we do not want to put anything toward it to get it. But when we understand what (or shall I say *Who* it is) we are looking at through the binoculars or telescope (of the Word of God), our choice of a hazy view over against a high def. view can be an alarming indication of how much we value the glory and wonder of the person of Jesus Christ. If the object of our study (or meditation) were a cheeto or an ape, I would understand the lack of passion, but when we understand that the Bible is the revelation of the infinite glorious God of the universe, the settling for mediocrity is quite disturbing. Anything that brings greater clarity to my understanding and vision of Him is worth the time and hassle.

Second, our approach to the word of God should be consistent with the way in which God has revealed Himself. Although God is above time, He has decided to reveal Himself to humans in time. This is something that Mark Driscoll is always stressing; that we must always make a distinction between timeless truths and timely methods.¹ In my estimation, this is no mere logical assessment of things; it is a biblical conviction. After all, the Bible is the record of the infinite, timeless God entering into our finite world to reveal Himself to us, redeem us, pursue us. He enters into our world packaging His timeless message about Himself and His plan of redemption in timely ways; He couches His timeless word in the vernacular of the times. You see, although God is transcendent, He does not speak to us from afar in an other-worldly way. As John Calvin argued, God accommodates us by speaking our language. Knowing that this is God’s method of communication, we should approach the Scriptures understanding that He ultimately tailor made His timeless word for the culture to which it was originally given. It is our responsibility to, at least as far as is necessary, enter into the mindset and culture of the times to which God originally spoke His word. Our approach to the word of God should be consistent with the way in which God has delivered His word to humans.

Third, a knowledge of the historical/cultural backgrounds of the scriptures should not be pursued as an end in itself. Ultimately, biblical backgrounds are a tool; they are only as useful to us as they help us better understand the Scriptures with accuracy, clarity, and precision. To be brutally honest with you, I wouldn’t give a hoot for the historical and cultural context of the first century if it did not bring greater clarity, understanding, and meaning to the Scriptures—uncovering the clear meaning of the text that is already there. Biblical backgrounds are only

¹ This emphasis of Driscoll is clearly expressed in his sermon on the emerging church. See <http://www.marshallchurch.org/media/religionsaves/emerging-church>.

helpful in so far as they enhance the reader's ability to understand the intention of the original, Spirit-inspired author.

A few years ago I preached a sermon on 1 Peter 1. After the sermon a man came up to me and asked me if I had been to bible school. I answered in the affirmative and then asked him why he asked. He said, "Well, I figured that you had because you dedicated quite a bit of your sermon to constructing the historical background of the book." He continued, "You know. I find that historical background stuff to be really interesting. Not many pastors emphasize it in their preaching. But I like it when pastors do emphasize it because it is just so interesting to me."

Although this man intended his comments to be uplifting, it revealed a complete misunderstanding of what I was communicating in the sermon. It would have been different if he would have come up to me and said, "You know, I love it when pastors emphasize the historical and cultural background of the Scriptures because it brings so much clarity and understanding to the text." I really don't care how interesting biblical backgrounds is; my only concern is how much it serves to bring to light the clear meaning of the text. This is why I am passionate about biblical backgrounds; because God reveals Himself in His word, a word which was couched in the vernacular of a particular cultural, and since He communicated Himself to the people of this culture, the more I immerse myself in an understanding of that culture, the more clear my view of God becomes (because he tailor made His word to the people of that culture).

Jeremiah 29:11

I want to draw your attention to Jeremiah 29:11 in order to show you how much an understanding of the historical/cultural context of a passage can affect your interpretation of a passage. Jeremiah 29:11 will be useful for two reasons: 1. because it is a historically loaded passage and 2. because it is one of the most popular and misunderstood passages in the Bible. Look at the text with me.

"For I know the plans I have for you"—[this is] the LORD's declaration—"plans for [your] welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."

This text is usually quoted as a text giving promise that God has planned health, wealth, and prosperity for His people. When someone does not get a promotion that they were banking on, they quote this verse, concluding that God must have some bigger and better position in store. The problem with such an interpretation is that it takes into account neither the literary context nor the historical context. A simple re-reading of the passage in context will prove that this is not the plain meaning of the text. Observe the text in context with me.

¹⁰ For this is what the LORD says: "When 70 years for Babylon are complete, I will attend to you and will confirm My promise concerning you to restore you to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you"—[this is] the LORD's declaration—"plans for [your] welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² You will call to Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you"—the LORD's declaration—"and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and places where I banished you"—the LORD's declaration. "I will restore you to the place I deported you from."

First of all, it is important to mention that Jeremiah is here delivering a message from God to His people, Israel. Israel was a sinful people. Because of the depth of their unrepentant sin, God had sent the wicked Babylonians against Israel as an act of judgment. Jeremiah fulfilled his role as a prophet (he delivered the message of Jeremiah 29 to God's people) during the time in which God rose up the evil Babylonians in judgment against the Israelites. God, through Jeremiah, is here (see verse 10) telling the exiled Israelites that they will be stuck as exiles in Babylon for 70 years because of their sin. He wants them to know that this is the sentence for their hard-hearted rebellion against Him. However, God does not want them to mis-read their circumstances. He understands that many will vilify Him for sending His own people into exile. God wants His people to know that although they will be in Babylon for 70 years under the reign and rule of the wicked Babylonians, this in no way means that He no longer loves them.

The Israelites were in captivity in Babylon for roughly 70 years (as God promised). Now this is significant considering the fact that the average life expectancy in the ancient world was about 50 years! What ultimately does this mean? God sent this message of "a future and a hope" (the promise of Jeremiah 29:11) to the Israelites at the beginning of their 70 year long subjection to Babylon. This means that absolutely every single one of the original recipients of this prophecy of 'a future and a hope' died far away from home in a foreign land, under the tyranny of a foreign ruler. And to prove this point even further, Jeremiah actually exhorts the people of Israel to 'take their coats off and stay awhile.' He wants them to know that they will surely be in Babylon for 70 years and thus, they should settle in, take a load off and pitch their tents in Babylon. Just look at 29:4-7;

This is what the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, says to all the exiles I deported from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives for your sons and give your daughters to men in marriage so that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there; do not decrease. Seek the welfare of the city I have deported you to.'

With this historical background in mind (understanding who Jeremiah was: a prophet sent with a message from God, who he was speaking to: the recently exiled Israelites, and the content of his message: God has sent you to Babylon for 70 years so dig your feet in the sand there, but do so with the understanding that my lack of redemptive action is not an indication of a lack of love for you) Jeremiah 29:11 has nothing to do with immediate, earth-bound fulfillment. Rather, this passage has everything to do with preparing the Israelites for a life-long tragedy of living in a foreign land under a foreign, evil ruler—so that they might endure it knowing that God did not send them there to destroy them, but rather so that He might cleanse and restore them.

He is saying, 'I have huge plans for all of you. You may not see them fulfilled in your lifetime. In fact, none of you will see the plans that I have for you fulfilled in this life time—in fact, all of you are going to die in a foreign land and under a foreign ruler—but please understand that I have your best interests in mind. I am ultimately doing this for your good. I am wounding you, but I am wounding you so that I might restore you unto myself.'

I cannot tell you how many people I have heard completely misuse this passage. Having lost their job, their house, or their cars they confidently assert, 'But the Lord has plans of prosperity for me, thus I can rest assured that all that I have lost will be returned; things will turn around for me soon enough because God says they will in Jeremiah 29:11.' However, a simple

look at the historical situation of this passage reveals how wrong-headed such a use of this passage is. This passage has nothing to do with God's immediate action in the face of suffering and loss. In fact, it has everything to do with God's prolonged action in the face of suffering and loss. It has everything to do with how to respond to an apparent prolonged lack of action on God's part in the face of extreme suffering and loss. The main point of this passage is not, "Things will turn around soon enough;" but rather, "God has been silent and absent for years and yet I will trust that He knows the plans that He has for me, and these are plans for my betterment and not for my destruction."

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to acknowledge the fact that many of you are probably thinking at this point; 'Jimmy, this sounds nice coming from your voice, but what about me? I haven't been to Bible school; I haven't had the time or the luxury of studying biblical backgrounds. If you are going to talk about the importance of an understanding of the historical/cultural context you need to understand that I am not an academic or an intellectual.' I understand this sentiment. However, I do not believe that historical and cultural backgrounds are as difficult as they are usually made out to be. Next week I will be discussing some practical ways in which you can pursue a basic understanding of the historical and cultural context of the Scripture without the demands of becoming a scholar or expert.