

BIB105 Biblical Hermeneutics

Unit 5b New Testament: Gospels and Acts

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Welcome back. Good to be with you again. Remember last lesson, we looked at meaning and application. We're going to move through the New Testament and Old Testament now. Just to give a little background of some of the sections, we're going to look at the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles in this particular lesson. And then we'll also spend some time with the letters in the epistles and then the Book of Revelation to kind of round out the New Testament. And then we'll get in the Old Testament as well.

So let's get started. Gospels literally means good news, and the focus point of the gospels is the life of Christ. That's pretty obvious to anyone who's a believer. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the four gospels, but the synoptic gospels tend to be Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Synoptic, seen together. John has a lot of different accounts, teachings of Jesus that weren't recorded in the other three. Still very valid and very accurate, of course, but just a different perspective as he was very close with Jesus and was probably with him even more so than some of the other apostles. So just an example here, and if you're looking at synoptic gospels and the prayers of Christ, they have maybe just a different angle on the same story. With the prayers of Jesus, we're looking at Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Matthew 26 has the time in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was praying. "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me." That really deep, emotional prayer. Jesus was literally praying drops of blood because of the tension that he was facing, knowing that he was about to be crucified. And we also see in Mark similar wording, same idea. "Father, remove this cup from me." And then Luke 22:42, "If you are willing, remove this cup from me." So all three telling the same story. A little different angle on the wording and they also have just a couple of different details from that story of the Garden of Gethsemane. And so the nice thing is you can take all three and piece together a more complete picture of the account in Gethsemane. And that happens throughout the life of Christ through different actions, but this was just a focus on his prayers.

So what are some things about the four gospels that we need to be mindful of? There are two simple interpretive questions. I just really broke this down for simplicity's sake. Number one, what does the smaller story tell us about Jesus? So when we're looking at a particular miracle of Christ or teaching, what do we learn about him in that moment? But then also, what is the author trying to communicate about Jesus with the particular stories that are linked together? So when you start to put a series of stories together, is there a bigger theme that's taking place that the author is trying to communicate?

So how do you read individual stories? So there's so many standard questions to ask. Any journalist should ask this of any story happening today. And that's who, what, where, when, and how. Very basic. Get the main characters involved. What are they doing? Where are they at? When is this taking place? And what's the result? How are things working out? So look for interpretive instructions from the author himself. For example, Luke 14:7 says, "When Jesus noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable." So without guessing, you know that the parable he's about to tell is something about spiritual pride or humility or putting others before yourself. And so Luke kind of leads us into that one. And so take some of those very visible cues from the author themselves.

Also, take special note of anything that's repeated in the story. John 15. The vine and the branches. The word "remain" is vital to understanding the passage. And we've talked about that before. Also be alert for places where the story shifts to direct discourse. So the example I'm going to look at, Matthew 17:5. At Jesus' transfiguration, we hear the Heavenly Father speak, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Well, this would have meant a lot to the disciple struggling with the

notion of Jesus being crucified. And when you see that direct discourse coming from God the Father specifically, that's a place to take note and answer some of the questions as to some of the main points.

Also, some other points when reading a series of stories. The most important thing to do is to look for connections between the stories. I'll just give you an example here from the end of Mark 4 through Mark 5. We've got four different stories taking place. At the end of Mark 4, we see the storm that rages on the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus is sleeping, and the apostles are starting to wonder, like "Hey, I think we're going to die." These were experienced fishermen who were afraid, so you knew the storm had to be pretty bad. And they wake Jesus up and he exhibits power over the sea by calming the waters. Pretty powerful moment not just with, obviously, Jesus' power, but for the apostles themselves as they are just amazed at how nature obeys his command. Pretty amazing experience. And then once they get to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, they're immediately confronted by the demon-possessed man who's living in the tombs, in the cemetery there, and Jesus shows his power over a legion of demons and then casting out the demons into a herd of pigs. Another pretty amazing story. So you see his power over nature. You see his power over the spiritual realm in Mark 5:21-24. And then a few verses later, 35 to 43, Jesus reveals his power over death by raising Jairus' daughter. So another amazing story. So you're seeing boom, boom, boom, back to back to back examples of Jesus' power in different aspects of our life experience.

And then the last one is he heals a woman's hemorrhage, which was very personal. A woman had been struggling and quietly touches the hem of his robe, and he is immediately drawn to her and has that brief personal interaction with her, which again just shows Jesus heals the woman of her physical ailment, but also, I think in a much more relational way, intimately connects with her and helps her out, which is again another powerful story. So you see these four stories back to back to back in the gospel of Mark. And every story exhibits Jesus' power but a different aspect of it and a different venue, if you will, in how that power is exhibited.

Always keep the larger context in view when you're applying the message of the gospels. Some principles to learn from the stories in Mark 4 and Mark 5. First of all, life is hard. Christians are not exempt from experiencing difficulty in this life. Apostles, fishermen experience fear, the spiritual darkness that sometimes we are confronted with and spiritual warfare. We also see the pain of loss and losing someone that we love, and then physical ailments and struggle. So all those stories, even though we weren't there, we can still experience today through the power of God.

Jesus is sovereign over forces hostile to God. Another great principle we can learn from this. Does this mean that he'll take away every difficulty? No, it does not. James speaks very clearly to this that we will experience trials and tribulations. That's just a part of life. That's part of living here in this broken world. But God will always give us just what we need to get through whatever that is and to learn through it. And then we need to trust Jesus in our desperate times. God has proven himself faithful so many times that we can trust him in this time of struggle. Hebrews 11:1 talks about that. That's how you build your faith. Not seeing what is going to happen. Faith is a substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. We don't know how it's going to resolve, but we can trust the Lord that he is still in control and that he's going to bring these things to a fruitful end for us spiritually.

So, some special literary forms in the gospels. One of the things you see is exaggeration, also called hyperbole. It's when a truth is overstated for the sake of effect to such an extent that a literal fulfillment is either impossible or completely ridiculous. One example from teachings of Christ, Matthew 5:29-30.

He says, “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away.” Wow. You get two shots and then you’re blind, if you were to take that literally. But he’s clearly not speaking literally here. Can you still have thoughts of lust with your eyes closed or not having eyes? Yes, you can. And so the bigger picture is whatever is causing you to stumble, get rid of that thing. Remove it from your life so it’s no longer a stumbling block. So he’s speaking in hyperbole here to prove the point that we need to put those boundaries around our lives to make sure that we’re living holy.

Number two, metaphor and simile. Both are literary vehicles, making comparisons. Metaphors tend to be implicit. Similes are explicit. I’m going to show you what I mean here. Example of a metaphor, again from Matthew 5:13 “You are the salt of the earth.” And so it sounds like he’s saying we’re literal salt. Obviously a metaphor. And we can get into some of the value of salt as far as preserving and bringing healing and that kind of thing. But then the example of a simile, his message to...well, really confrontation with the Pharisees and Sadducees in Matthew 23:27. “You are like whitewashed tombs.” And so, very clear he’s not calling them whitewashed tombs, but he’s using that example. The key when you’re looking at metaphors and similes, though, locate the intended point, but don’t press the details too far. If you start examining every aspect of salt and its chemical makeup, it’s going to break down and you’re going to get lost in some nonsensical details that really have nothing to do with the main point of the story. So just stick to the basics when it comes to metaphors and similes. Don’t over examine or overanalyze.

Narrative irony, grounded in the principle of contrast between what is expected and what actually happens. We see in Luke 12 the story of the rich man who is very successful, builds new storehouses because he’s had abundance of grain, and he’s like, “You know what? I’m going to take it easy and enjoy and just kick back for a little while.” But the irony is the Lord is like, “You fool. Tonight, your life is required of you.” And so he’s got his last day of living. So that irony. We don’t know when things are going to come to an end here on this earth, and so we got to make sure that whatever we’re doing, we’re doing it for the Lord’s work and his call. If we start to get selfish and comfortable and lazy, then that’s a problem.

Some other literary forms. We have rhetorical questions. These are questions designed to make a point rather than to retrieve an answer. Example from Matthew 6:27. “Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” And clearly the example is no. And even science today verifies that stress does not add to your life. It takes away from your life. Jesus, though, was not looking for a scientific answer there. He was kind of stating the obvious when he asked that question.

Number five, parallelism. Poetic parallelism is an expression to describe a relationship between two or more lines of text. Getting into some nitty-gritty here, so I’m just going to push through this quickly. But you’re more than welcome to pursue this a little bit more. There’s some really cool examples of parallelism in Scripture, but the one I’m going to show you with synonymous parallelism are lines that say basically the same thing. So in Matthew 7:7, we see Jesus saying “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you.” So three different lines there all pretty much saying the same thing as it relates to prayer and seeking his will. And then there’s two other types of parallelism. Contrastive, in which the second line contrasts the first. And developmental. The second line repeats part of the first, then advances the thought. So feel free to look at those a little more closely on your own. I think you’ll find some cool nuggets of wisdom and truths of God’s word there.

And then the sixth literary form are parables. These are some of our favorites. This is a story with two levels of meaning where certain details of the story represent something else. The example, prodigal son (definitely revolutionary in my life, that story, with my own journey with God), but you see the son here, the prodigal son's father is God the Father, very clearly, waiting for us, loving us even though we sometimes walk away. And so some great details there in that story. Again, don't overanalyze. But there's definitely two levels of meaning with those parables.

Let's get into the Book of Acts a little bit. The Book of Acts is really the continuing acts of Jesus by his spirit through the apostles and other early Christian leaders. So obviously, the very beginning of Acts 1, we see Jesus leaving, ascending to heaven, and giving his last words to his followers. And then the day of Pentecost, and then from that point forward, it was the Holy Spirit as the predominant part of the Trinity in the life of the early church. So Acts is a sequel, if you will, to the Gospel of Luke. If you know, Luke is the author of both of those. If you take a look at Luke 1 and Acts 1, you see just some personal statements in the opening few sentences there. And this was written to Luke's friend, Theophilus. Not a whole lot is known about Theophilus other than the name seems to be a little more dignified and more formal. But we do know that Luke was definitely writing to Theophilus to pretty much give him a discipleship manual for a new believer, tell you everything you need to know about the life of Jesus and his actions and his words, his crucifixion, his resurrection, and then going to talk to you about the early church and how the Holy Spirit has worked through those believers. So it's a great two-part series for any new Christian if they just want to get a handle on that time period.

So number one, Acts is a story, a narrative, if you will, of some major stories and characters in the 1st century church. It is a theological history. The gospels are a theological biography about the life of Jesus, of course, while Acts is a theological history of the early church. And then Acts 1:8 is a brief outline of the book. We'll look at that here in a moment.

So, some themes from the Book of Acts. First one, clearly, the Holy Spirit. The whole operation starts with the Holy Spirit of God. In Acts 1, Jesus promises the Spirit is going to be coming. And then Acts 2, the Spirit arrives on the day of Pentecost. And the rest of Acts is pretty much the work of the Spirit through the believers. And that image right there is Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, which I thought was kind of a cool picture, so I thought I'd share that with you.

And then the second point, God's sovereignty, definitely a clear theme in the Book of Acts. The work that began with Jesus is now continued through the Spirit. God's work is always for the sake of the gospel message, not always for the comfort and convenience of its messengers, which is why he has not promised us health, wealth, and prosperity, but he has promised us rewards and spiritual blessings if we are obedient, particularly to that call in Matthew 28 of going and making disciples. But the gospel message has got to be the focal point of each of our lives. No matter where you're working, where you're located in the world, it's got to be something that we do naturally on a day to day basis.

A few other themes. So we have the church, brand new in the scene, at the day of Pentecost. The Spirit works primarily through the body of Christ to accomplish his will. We also see prayer is something that is... There's a lot of stories of prayer in the Book of Acts, from the time where they're gathered on the day of Pentecost to when they're praying and Peter gets free from prison in that supernatural way, all the way through some examples of Paul in his missionary journeys. And then suffering. And this is the difficult side of being a Christ follower, the cost of discipleship. And the early Christians were persecuted greatly for the sake of the advancement of the gospel. Wherever you are in the world, you owe the

foundation of that to those early believers who sacrificed so much for that gospel to spread. And the first martyr there in Jerusalem was Stephen and there is the apostle Paul who, the execution committee, if you will, laid their robes at his feet. But this was clearly, as we know, transformative from Saul to Paul later as he became deeply committed to the gospel message.

And then final few themes here from Acts. We see the Gentiles becoming a part of God's plan. The gospel starts with the Jews but quickly advances to the Gentiles and the ends of the earth, just a city line there. And then witness. The apostles focus their witness on the resurrection of Jesus. And it also relates to the word "martyr" because someone who's a witness, that persecution and sacrifice sometimes becomes a part of it.

So how is Acts organized? We see in Acts 1:8 essentially the outline for the book. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth." And you see that from Acts 1 through Acts 28, those sections of how the gospel advanced, starting at the epicenter there in Jerusalem and going to where we are today, as continued on from that time. Even though Acts 28 ended, the gospel has still advanced and it's still advancing across the globe.

So grasping the message of Acts, it is both normative, meaning there's things in the Book of Acts that can apply to us today, but it's also descriptive. There are some things that just apply to the early church. And so how do we know? What are some guidelines that we can follow to know which parts of Acts are normative for us today or just merely descriptive for that 1st century?

So number one, what did Luke intend to communicate to us readers? In Acts 8, you see the conversion of the Samaritans and the Ethiopian, how God overcomes both social and physical barriers with the gospel. So that's something that's definitely practical for us today. There are positive and negative examples in the characters of the story. We see John Mark deserting the missions team there in Acts 13. But of course, we know later Paul wrote and wanted Mark's presence and relationship, again because he had obviously proven himself.

Number three, read individual stories in light of the rest of the Book of Acts and the New Testament. One of the things that's unique in this transition time, as the gospel is spreading, not everybody had heard about Jesus, which is kind of surprising, but you realize that Jesus was just in a very far away corner of the Roman Empire and there was a lot of people all over the Roman Empire that didn't hear about Christ. And so Acts 19, we see one of those examples. So we have believers who had received the baptism of repentance through John the Baptist maybe at one of their journeys to Jerusalem to worship at the temple and they heard John's message and repented and received his baptism there in the Jordan River. But that was it. They went back to their lives somewhere else in the Roman Empire and they didn't hear about the Holy Spirit. They didn't hear about the Messiah and the Messiah's death on the cross and resurrection. And so this was kind of a unique situation. And Paul was like, "Have you received the Holy Spirit yet?" and they were like, "Well, we don't really know." And so we see them receiving the Holy Spirit this time. So this is not grounds for some kind of doctrine of a two-stage salvation, but this was just one of those unique things that is more descriptive to the early church. And that's something that's normative for us today. And then look to other parts of Acts to clarify what is normative, and then look for repeated patterns and themes, not just in Acts but the rest of the New Testament.

So that concludes just a brief overview and some information about the gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. So hopefully, that was helpful. Next lesson, we're going to get into the rest of the New

Testament, which are the epistles or the letters from some of the apostles and some of the other followers of Jesus, and the Book of Revelation. So, looking forward to going through that with you.