



Biblical Hermeneutics: Principles for Bible Interpretation

5. Genre (1): How to Interpret Narrative

One of the most helpful guides I received for Bible interpretation was on how to discern the lesson intended in a narrative, or story. The Bible comes to us in many genres, or types of writing. There are instructional (didactic) passages, like the New Testament letters, but there are also large portions of narrative in the Old Testament, the gospels and the book of Acts. Besides the didactic and narrative genres, the Bible comes in the form of poetry, parables, prophecy, apocalyptic, and wisdom literature. There are specific tips that help us interpret each of these genres. Let's consider some of them.

Didactic passages *tell* us the lesson we are to learn. "Pray continually," Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. But how do we know the intended lesson from a story? A rule of thumb is to remember that while didactic passages *tell* us the lesson, narratives *show* us the lesson. We are to learn by observing the details an author includes, what persons do, and what happens when they do it. For example, in Acts, Luke refers to God's people praying in 21 of 28 chapters. And in most, if not all cases, he tells us what the result was from their prayers – God responds. Luke included those details intentionally to *show* us that we, too, ought to pray continually as the early church did.

Before illustrating this principle further there is one important caveat: Be careful not to draw *too many* inferences from what happens in a Bible narrative. In Acts, for example, we might infer that the baptism of the Spirit occurs at some point after we come to faith, as a second experience, and always with speaking in tongues. Why? Because that is what happened to the followers of Jesus in Acts 2, the Gentile converts in Acts 10, and John's disciples in Acts 19. A rule of interpretation is that didactic passages always interpret narrative passages. If instructional passages teach that all believers are baptized by the Spirit the moment they believe, and that not all believers speak in tongues (and the Bible does both) then the narrative is not meant to teach otherwise. Rather, the book of Acts tells us of a transitional period from old to new covenant conditions. God chose a sign (tongues speaking) to help Jewish believers and the apostles, understand that both Gentiles and John's disciples are included in new covenant conditions. We could add many examples of this principle. For example, in another story Jesus told a rich man to sell all he had and give the money away. Do we then, need to do so? No, the Bible does not take that view of wealth in instructional passages.

There are many examples in the book of Acts of the author showing us, rather than telling us, a lesson. The book of Acts, you remember, records how the kingdom of God spread across the Roman empire in 30 years after Christ's death and resurrection. It happened in three stages. Luke begins this story with the words, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach..." (Acts 1:1). Why did he write that detail? What is he showing us? (Always important questions to ask). It occurred to me that if the gospel of Luke tells us what Jesus *began* to do and teach perhaps Luke is telling us in Acts what Jesus *continued* to do and teach. If that is true, I reasoned, Jesus should show up leading the mission through the book of Acts. And that is what we find. In the first eleven verses of stage one, Jesus gives the apostles their marching orders. The next, pivotal, chapter adds that it is Jesus who pours out the Holy Spirit to power the mission (2:33). Stage two of the mission begins in reaction to the stoning of Stephen (8:1) and we read that Jesus stood at the right hand of God supervising the whole thing (7:54-60). Finally, Jesus directly confronts Saul/Paul, and commissions him to lead stage three of the mission (Acts 9).

Seeing these details, we learn this important lesson: Jesus is leading the mission of God on earth. This is immensely comforting when the church seems to be losing and evil winning. We can lose but not Jesus. He is all-powerful and all-wise. He will do what he wants, when he wants, how he wants, with whom he wants. It takes pressure off church leaders who mistakenly believe that success depends entirely on them and their hard work and limited skills. Nope. Jesus leads the mission and he cannot fail.



"...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...." (1 Peter 2:2)

CONDENSED MILK

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