



Biblical Hermeneutics: Principles for Bible Interpretation

6. Genre (2): Interpreting Instructional Texts

As we've mentioned, the Bible comes to us in a number of forms (genres) and each has unique principles for accurate interpretation. We've touched upon rules for understanding narrative portions; let's do the same now for didactic (instructional) passages. We'll use the Epistles as our model. (Interestingly, only six New Testament books are not Epistles - the four gospels, Acts, and Revelation - and even they contain didactic portions.). See *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Fee, Stuart) for more detail.

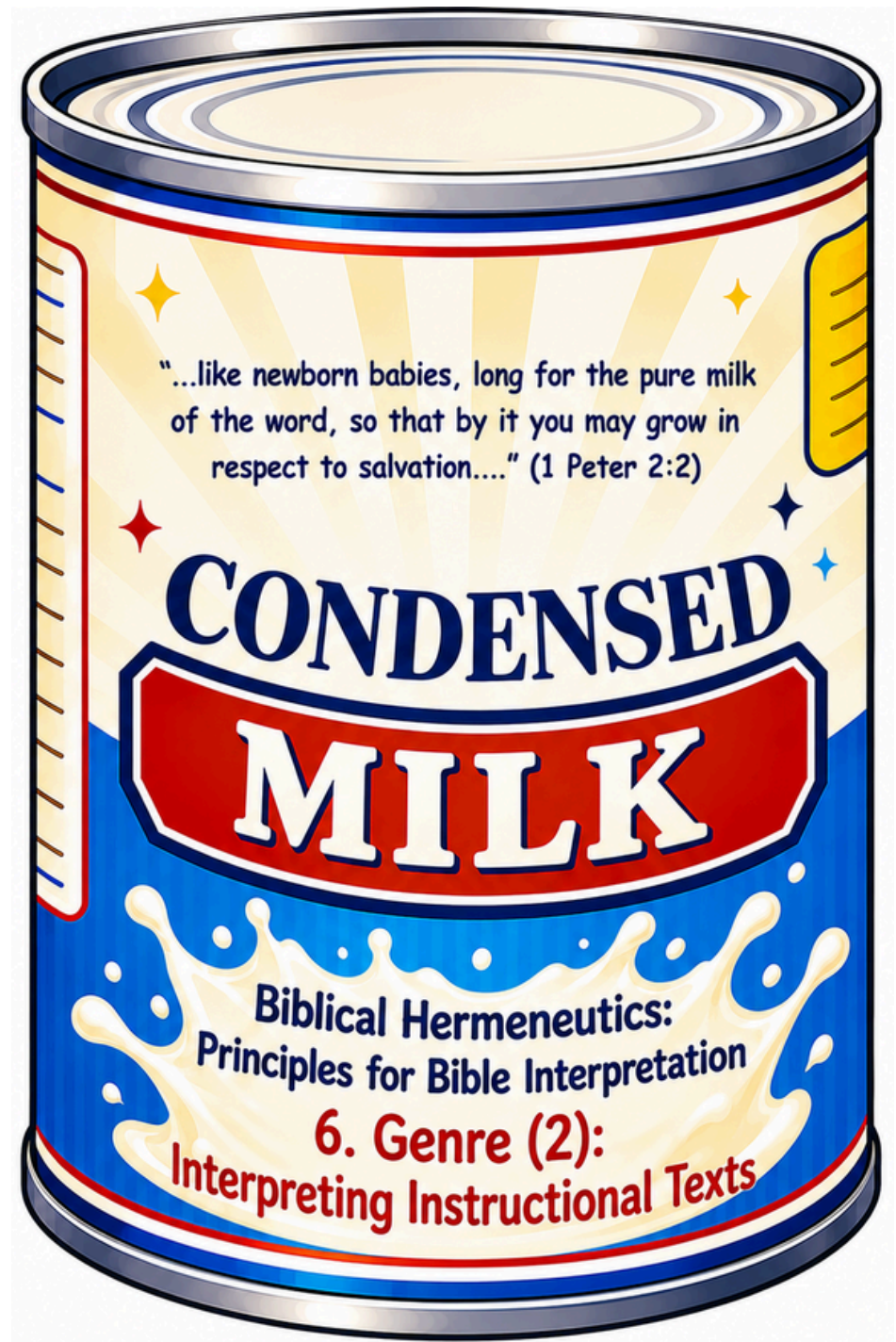
Whether we are reading the Epistles devotionally and in small parts or as a study it is important to understand the big picture, for the big picture affects all the parts. Reading the whole Epistle in one sitting is ideal but an introduction to the Epistle, in a study Bible or Bible dictionary, will greatly help. Most importantly, it is important to understand the occasional nature of the Epistles. All the Epistles were "occasioned" by some issue in a church. Discerning that is like listening to one end of a telephone conversation. We hear one side and have to piece together the whole from that. Remember that everything in an Epistle was written to address a first century issue for first century people. We must hear, then, what the author is saying to them, in their context, before we can make a valid application to ourselves.

We will take 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 as an example. In that passage Paul reluctantly does some "boasting" in which he lists the many ways he has suffered in his missionary work. He ends this list with a reference to a time he was let down through a wall in order to escape a city and avoid an arrest. This last "boast" seems anti-climactic. What is that about, and how do we apply it to ourselves?

For time and space, we will simply summarize the occasion of this letter. Paul is addressing a church he founded but has since been infiltrated by influencers who not only question Paul's credentials but also inflate their own importance by boasting about their supposed credentials. They are having such an effect on the church that Paul feels the need to defend himself and his ministry. Yet it is so contrary to the gospel he cannot boast about his strengths. Instead, he boasts about his weaknesses. Everything in his list represents a weakness, including the fact that he worked with his hands. No self-respecting teacher did that in Paul's day.

A little historical context sheds light on his boasting. It was common for military leaders to create a "boast list" after a military campaign, sometimes inscribing this list on a monument, in which they announced to everyone all they accomplished - who they killed, took prisoner, the plunder they brought back, and so on. Paul models his boasting on this but cannot bear to actually boast. So he lists, rather, his weaknesses. Now, the highest Roman military honor went to the soldier of centurion rank or higher who was first over the wall of an enemy city at the end of a siege. Playing off this, Paul ends his weakness list by telling of the time he ran away from his enemies by being let down through a hole in the wall as he escaped the city. Paul's point is what he earlier stated, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (2 Corinthians 10:17).

This is a sound rebuke to all our boasting, whether it be privately thought or outwardly stated. Anytime we think we know better or do better we must see that anything we might boast about is God's grace despite our weakness. Stop feeling superior. Stop looking down on others. Thank God for Jesus.



"...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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