

Effective Bible Study: Lesson 2

Occasion and Purpose

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I want to start this lesson off with a couple things. First of all, if you are serious about this, you will need a journal or a tablet to make notes. There are some initial observations you may want to come back to later. Secondly, please do not read any commentaries in preparation for some of the assignments. The point of these lessons is to help you understand for yourselves what the Bible says. Later in this series, perhaps in the next lesson, I will start revolving our exercises around one particular small book of the Bible. If you follow through with some of these exercises, you will be on your way to writing your own commentary on it.

Today we want to consider the context of a Bible book. In the last study, I mentioned the various genres of books that are included in the Bible. We know this very well. Context begins by understanding what book you are reading. A person asked to give a lesson about the life and teachings of Jesus wouldn't likely spend a whole lot of time in the book of Genesis. The point is, that Biblical phrases and passages should be interpreted in the context in which they are written. When followed and studied God's word enlightens us and His power and work in our lives can revolutionize and change the course of an individual's life. Today we want to talk about keeping a book and passages within their textual and historical context. Modern parallels and application can be drawn later, but we want to start with the immediacy of the text's message. Once you have landed on a book to study, you need to begin considering two things:

The "occasion" and the "purpose" of the writing.

All books of the Bible have a chief concern. They may have many concerns expressed throughout, but they all have a chief concern. There is a chief story, a primary purpose. In order to see that you, you need to be reading, praying about, meditating on and paying attention to the text. And you learn a lot from the text by asking questions about it. I want to emphasize; in order to arrive at book's chief occasion (or setting) and purpose you need to start asking a lot of questions about the text. Sometimes these answers will be obvious, and other times not so much, which is where prayer and discernment comes in.

Here are some initial questions to ask about the text which will help you understand the "occasion" of the writing.

- What's going on with the author? What's going on with the recipients? What kinds of problems are being addressed or highlighted? What are the author's concerns? What is the chief concern?

Now in the next lesson, we are going to look at some reading exercises and other questions to consider when you are reading a text. We live in a blessed time and have access to so many resources today that can help us with this, not the least of which are a plethora of various English translations of the Bible. Understand, too, that asking these questions and reaching conclusions will take a person longer with 1 Corinthians than a small book like Philemon. All of the aforementioned question will help you understand the "occasion" (and a glimpse of the purpose) of a text's writing, even when a specific author and audience are never named.

The "purpose" of the writing focuses more on the "why" of the writing. The following are some concepts to consider which are frequently emphasized throughout the Bible. Various genres may evoke different questions. But generally, the following are various questions you need to ask in order to better understand the "purpose" of the writing.

- Why is this text being written? To solve a problem? To make aware? To persuade? To inform? To warn? To motivate? To remind? To scare? To anger? To provoke? To correct?

Now that you have these questions in mind, after an initial reading of the text, collect your data and write down your observations so that you can come back to them later. When it comes to collecting data, write down those verses that tell us some of the things that are happening. Do not only say what the text says, but also rephrase it to reflect what you believe might be happening to the readers and or the author. Write down what is stated and what is implied. For example. Consider what Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:25. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." So, you could write down:

- v. 25 - Stated – Husbands should love their wives.
- Implied – This could imply that the Ephesian husbands were not loving their wives the way Christ wanted them to.

Here are other questions that you can ask when determining the occasion and purpose:

- Is there tension between the writer and recipient?
- Are the recipients being persecuted?
- Are they being led astray by false teaching?

- Is there turmoil from within or without?
- Is there an economic or societal conflicts or crisis?
- Are the recipients in danger?
- What kinds of commands and or application is the writer leaving them with?

Take all of that data, all of those observations lump them together and formulate what you feel is the overall occasion and purpose of the text. Zero in on one major issue or summary of what has specifically happened that prompted this book. The data you collected will also come in many later when considering a verse or passages more immediate context. Once you've got it all together, write down a brief (3-4 sentence summary paragraph). "The occasion of the book is _____ and the setting of the book is _____. The author is appearing to get the readers to _____. This is implied because the author emphasized _____."

So, here is you next assignment, should you choose to accept it. This time, I want you to go to the New Testament book of Philemon. Reading through this shouldn't take nearly as long as Psalm 119. I want you to take with you the attitude we spoke about in the last lesson; that God's word should be entered into respectfully. I also want you to take with you everything we just looked at, all those questions in order understand the occasion and purpose of this book (letter).

Stay tuned for more lessons.