

Finer Grounds

How to Study the Bible Lesson 5: Purpose and Keywords

Our next step in this study process will be to determine why the author is writing. We have already done our study of the author; knowing his background can help us to understand where he is coming from and give us some clues to his intent. In this chapter we will look at two different ways to decide more definitively why a book was written. First, and probably the most obvious, is to look for specific reasons that the author has given. Secondly, we will examine the use of keywords and scriptures and what they can tell us about an author's intent. It is important when reading to find the purpose of a particular book that you read it in its entirety. If it is possible it is best if you can read it in one sitting. This will make it much easier for you to see the big picture of the book.

We won't spend much time on this subject because it is pretty straight forward; however, it is important to understand. Many times, especially in the epistles, an author will actually state in a very clear way why he is writing. When the writer does this, he takes the mystery out of the equation and because the writers were inspired we can trust what they say. There may be secondary reasons for writing, which also might be stated or implied.

Let's dig in and look at some specific examples. First, turn to Luke 1:1-4. Here Luke specifically says "It seemed fitting for me as well...to write it out for you in consecutive order...so that you might know the exact truth about the things you have been taught." We know that he is writing this book so we can see the truth about the account of Jesus' life and ministry. If stated, the purpose can usually be found in the first few verses of a book.

Occasionally, we will see a stated purpose later in the book. This is one of the reasons why it is good to read through a book as a whole before you begin your verse by verse study. Read 1 Thessalonians 4:1.

"Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you excel still more."

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy recognize that the church in Thessalonica is already walking to please God and they are writing so that they can "excel still more" in their Christian walk.

An author's stated purpose can help us to determine more about the audience and what specifically he is trying to address with them. This is an important step in internalizing the word of God. When we know the purpose we can see how any writing can apply to our lives.

When trying to discover an author's intended message, an important aspect to pay attention to is the use of keywords. Simply put, a keyword is a word or phrase a writer uses repeatedly for emphasis. We do this in our everyday speech; if there is something we want to be sure our husbands or children remember, we are sure to repeat it several times. This is also a key element in teaching: repetition, repetition, repetition. The writers of scripture used this tool throughout the Bible.

When searching for keywords, look for words that are repeated throughout a specific passage or an entire

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book. Pay particular attention to synonyms too! You can write these words and where they occur on a separate page; however, it helps me tremendously to mark them in my Bible. It allows me to quickly glance and see important themes, where they occur and how they relate to each other. I use regular colored pencils to mark these, drawing a box around them and coloring it in. Some prefer highlighters, but make sure to use Bible highlighters that don't bleed through the page. I prefer regular colored pencils because there are more colors offered than the 3 or 4 highlighter colors available. If you don't want to mark in your Bible, but you are a visual person who likes to see your keywords marked instead of in list form, simply print or copy the passage you are studying and mark that up.

For our example, turn to Matthew 13. You will notice that Jesus uses the phrase "kingdom of heaven" many times throughout this chapter. If you read the entire book, you will notice that Matthew brings out the words "king," "kingdom," and "kingdom of heaven." Not only does he bring out these key words, but he focuses on genealogical records similar to that of royalty. When we understand this, we can see that Matthew was trying to emphasize the fact that Jesus was the coming king prophesied about. When we understand this context, we can understand why he would have emphasized certain things that other gospel writers didn't.

While finding and analyzing keywords can be time consuming, it is worth the effort. It is also a good idea, once you have discovered a key word to look that word up in your Strong's Concordance or another lexicon to find the meaning in the original language. This sometimes will reveal meanings or synonyms you wouldn't have otherwise thought of.

Chapter 4: Homework

Exercise 1:

Read through Jude and list any direct references he makes to why he is writing:

Turn to Ecclesiastes 1 and read. What is the author's purpose in writing this book?

Read 1 Corinthians 1 and list any references to why Paul is writing to the church in Corinth:

Exercise 2:

Read Hosea 4:11-19 and identify the keywords (don't forget to look for synonyms). Using the information we learned in the last chapter, what is the significance of this keyword?

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Read Joshua 19 and search for any keywords you find. What is the link between this keyword (which also happens to be a major theme throughout the book of Joshua) and the promises made to Abraham in Genesis?

Read James 2:14-26. What are the two major keywords here? Based on those keywords, what is the major theme of this passage?

Exercise 3:

Read 1 Peter. Identify the purpose of this writing and any keywords that you find. Explain why Peter wrote the book and why this was significant to the people of this time historically and why Peter, himself, would have been passionate about this subject.
