

Finer Grounds

How to Study the Bible

Lesson 6: Determining and Examining the Pericope

Now that we have thoroughly examined the background and author's intention in a book, we will start to divide it into sections, or pericopes, for easier study. A pericope (pə'rikəpē) is a selection or an excerpt from a book. In this chapter we will look at how to determine where your pericope should begin and end, identifying the tone of the section and looking at the main idea of this portion of the text.

There are many clues in the text that will tell us where a pericope should start and end. Most of them require nothing more than simple observation. Keep in mind that deciding which section to study is not an exact science; you may not always come up with the same section as someone else.

If you are looking at a specific account in text, pay attention to the characters and where they are mentioned and the beginning and ending of events. As an example, let's turn to 1 Samuel and try to determine the first pericope. Upon reading, you will discover that the first account in this book is the account of Hannah praying for and finally giving birth to Samuel. While there are several supporting characters in this section, the main one is Hannah. We see her mentioned throughout chapter one and then her song at the beginning of chapter 2. In 1 Samuel 2:12, not only do we notice the absence of Hannah, a new account begins and new characters are introduced. For purposes of this exercise, we will say the pericope is 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11. We could also divide into smaller sections such as 1 Samuel 1:1-1:28 (the actual account) and 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (Hannah's song).

Another important thing to pay attention to when dividing the text is the use of conjunctions. If you see

therefore, but, and or anything similar, it is there to connect certain text together. Your pericope should never start or end with these words because you will be leaving out an important section of the text and how it relates to what you are studying. Turn in your Bible to Ephesians 4:1. We might be tempted to start our pericope at the beginning of the chapter; however, you will notice that this chapter begins with the word therefore. That means that the section before will give us the reason for these verses. We should be sure to start our pericope at verse 20 (not in verse 21 because it is the middle of a sentence) or before. Now we know why Paul is imploring them to "walk in a worthy manner."

When reading through your pericope, an important thing to take note of is the tone of the author or speaker. This can tell us a lot about what exactly he was trying to convey. Adding an emotion to the scriptures can help us tremendously when trying to personalize them. Be sure you pay attention to any terms or phrases that may define the emotion of the author like "plead", "You brood of vipers!", or "beloved." Once you have identified some of these words, read through the passage again and decide what sentiment the author was trying to convey.

For our example, let's look at Philippians 3:1-11. Notice the use of "beware" and "safeguard." We can see that Paul is warning them against something. This is a very earnest plea since he refers to them as "my brethren." It is evident that Paul has a deep love for the church in Philippi and wants to warn them of what may creep in to the congregation. He is not scolding them as he does in some of his letters, but

Finer Grounds

shows his strong affection. Once we understand this, we can almost hear him begging and pleading for us to have the same caution. This makes the words actually come to life for us. Once this happens it gives us a deeper conviction about the text than when it was simply words and commands on a page.

Once we have determined the tone of a pericope, we can start looking at some of the details of the passage. Most authors will write in one of two ways, the first being giving the main idea and then supporting it with examples or elaborations. The other would be starting with examples or minor points and then concluding with a summary statement. In order to fully understand a passage, we must understand the main idea that the author was trying to convey. Once we do this it becomes much easier to fit the details in and know why an author said what he did.

James 2:1-13 serves as a great example of this. Notice that he begins by giving a main idea: "My brethren do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism." He then goes on to elaborate with a specific example of a rich and poor man coming to the assembly. Continuing on, he points out their behavior as violating the law. In verse, 13 we see a summary statement: "For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment." Throughout this section James both places his main idea at the beginning and at the end. Do not judge and show favoritism. Once we know the main idea of this passage, it makes some of the details and examples much more clear.

In your homework this week, we will determine and examine a different pericope with each exercise. Don't forget to incorporate what you learned in the previous chapters into your homework; it will give you a deeper understanding to each of the passages.

Remember this study is meant to be cumulative in nature it all goes together!

Lesson 6: Homework

Exercise 1:

Turn to Galatians 1:6. Read the surrounding verses and determine the pericope:

Read through the entire pericope and list any emotional words or phrases that might give us an idea of tone:

Based on your reading and the emotional words you discovered, what is the tone of this section of scripture?

Read through the pericope once more and identify the main idea:

Finer Grounds

List any supporting thoughts to the main idea:

Exercise 2:

Turn to Matthew 23:33 and determine the pericope:

What is the tone of this section? How do you know?

What is this section about? List some support:

Exercise 3:

Start with Nahum 1:5, determine and examine the pericope. Add any background information you feel is pertinent to this section of scripture.
