

Interpretation - Observing the Melodic Line

I. The Journey of Interpretation

In this course there is a large focus on observation and interpretation, but we don't want you to forget that is only part of the process! Let's keep the whole journey in mind:

A. Preparation

Bible interpretation is always a spiritual endeavor. If any good is going to come from it the Spirit of God must be at work. We need His eyes to see and understand His truth! So let's plead with Him to open our eyes. We need to come to the text with a willingness to be changed, with humility, a submission to God, and a desperation for His Spirit to work in us!

Psalms 119:18; 139:23-24

Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.

B. Observation

We begin by asking questions of the text. Read! Read! Read! We want to hold off on coming to conclusions as long as possible so we don't misconstrue evidence that supports our preconceived ideas. Be a good detective!

C. Interpretation

Now we try to understand the meaning of the text. What does this passage mean? How does everything we observed fit together? What is the point (to original audience)? Why did the author say this? How does this passage fit into the flow of thought of the book/section?

D. Consultation

We study the text on our own, but also interact with those who have studied it in the past, and wrestle through it with those who are walking with us in the present because we all have blind spots. God has placed us all in **community** for a reason. Purely individualistic interpretation is proud. We need to be extremely careful not to interpret in an echo chamber. We are all subject to bias and blind spots. And so we should value not only what people are saying today, but what the church has taught and believed for centuries. Tradition is not ultimate in interpretation, but we want to give it proper weight in our thinking and stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us.

If possible, even have others study through the same text with you. It's far too easy to ride on our own hobby horses and to focus on some true principles and exclude others that don't fit with our understanding. Study good commentaries and discuss with your fellow pastors/elders.

Proverbs 12:15; 18:17; 27:17

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But a wise man is he who listens to counsel.

The first to plead his case seems right, until another comes and examines him.

Iron sharpens iron, So one man sharpens another.

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

James 1:19; 3:1-2; 5:19-20

This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger...

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

E. Meditation

Take time to ponder, memorize, and meditate on the text! Let it dwell in you! This is a step that is often overlooked. I love to spend time after I feel like I understand the meaning of the text just thinking about it. So what? Let's soak in it. God's Word is so profound,

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Joshua 1:8-9

"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Psalms 1:2

But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

F. Application

The goal is for Scripture to change our thinking and our worldview and for us to live differently. All right action flows out of right thinking. We want to actually be conformed to Christ!

Ephesians 4:20-25

But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.

Romans 12:1-3

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

1 Peter 1:14-15

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior...

II. Observation - Noticing the Details

Ask questions before you come up with answers! Enjoy the journey, the joy of discovery!

A. Be a good detective!

If we start coming up with theories before we have done enough observing we may miss some of the clues. We may inadvertently throw out clues that are important because they don't fit our current theory. Like a good detective we need to do all our observation before we start coming to conclusions.

Is there anything out of the ordinary? Is anything emphasized? Is anything repeated? Sit and meditate on your passage as long as possible before coming to conclusions. Once we form conclusions, it can be hard to change them! It is easy to throw out evidence that doesn't support our interpretation!

A good detective attempts to understand what happened and **why**. A detective may come to a crime scene and on the surface the evidence doesn't seem clear. The facts may seem to contradict each other. But in a crime scene, one actual thing happened and in reality all the facts support that correct interpretation of those facts.

Not only did one thing actually happen, but there was also a primary motive for what happened. In the same way, all the facts in a passage point to a single correct interpretation of the linguistic facts and a single motive. Our goal is to figure out how all the words relate together to that single overarching purpose.

A good detective notices everything, and then starts to piece together a coherent and cohesive picture of what happened. A good detective will ask tons of questions and will chase down every possible lead. A good detective will weed out all the answers that aren't relevant, but will stay open to all interpretations as long as possible.

B. Read! Read! Read!

- Read the entire book through in one sitting. Read large sections at a time. Try to understand the flow of thought and see the big picture. Look for connections between sections, key themes, or repeated ideas. Read the section you are studying over and over.
- Read the book in different translations. (More literal: LSB, NASB, ESV, BSB, CSB; Less literal: NIV, NET, NLT).
- Listen to the book. Read the book out loud. Saturate yourself in the Word.
- As you are reading, take note of observations and questions you have.

C. Table Discussion: Be a good detective in Ephesians 4:11, what do you observe?

III. The Goal of Interpretation

A. Discover what the author is seeking to **accomplish in the recipients**

Every passage in Scripture is ultimately trying to **accomplish something** in the lives of the recipients.

The author is trying to affect some change in their thinking, values, worldview, emotions, and/or will. Our goal is to discover the change he was trying to accomplish and **by what means**, and apply those means to ourselves in our context. This usually means trying to understand the overarching principles the author is teaching about who God is, who we are, and what His plan is. Principles transcend time and the specific application of those truths to the original audience.

This means that the key question of Bible interpretation is this: **Why did the author say that?** Constantly ask yourself this question when reading the Bible. We are always seeking to understand the point or purpose of an author's words. What effect would they have had on the original recipients? How would it make them feel? How would it encourage or challenge them? Why did the author say these words this way and not another way?

i. Examples

Jonah: The prophet was seeking to convict Israel of their self-righteous lack of compassion **by** telling the story of how God humbled him to expose his own self-righteous lack of compassion in contrast to a compassionate God who graciously saves.

2nd Corinthians: Paul is seeking to preserve the Corinthians love for and living out the gospel **by** showing the glorious nature of the cross, **by** showing the goodness of sacrificial giving, **and by** defending God's power through weakness in his own life.

Romans: Paul is trying to encourage the Roman church to support gospel mission (including his trip to Spain) **by** explaining the need for and glory of the gospel.

Hebrews: The author is trying to encourage the Hebrew Christians he was writing to to hold fast to Christ **by** explaining how Christ is better (sacrifice, mediator, Son, covenant), **and by** exhorting and warning the people that it is death to forsake Him.

ii. The author's tone is key

Since we are trying to understand what the author's intended change is in the recipients' hearts, we always want to carefully note his tone. The tone tells us a lot about how the author was intending the truth to affect the recipients. The author could be intending to inform, remind, explain, encourage, warn, command, request, question, relieve, stir up, grieve, promise, inform, or awe the audience. The tone says a lot about what affections the author intends to stir up in the heart and will.

Also note that the different genres and types of writing in Scripture such as narrative, epistle, law, poetry, and prophecy all effect us and 'hit us' in different ways. Every different type of text communicates the author's intent differently. This is what is so beautiful about Scripture. God communicates His message in so many different ways that all move us in the same direction, towards knowing and worshipping Him.

iii. The author's method is significant

In order for the passage to carry our conscience, we have to see how the author's intent comes from the actual words of the author. Often we want to ask ourselves, "Why did the author use these words, how do they show us what goal the author had?" We have to understand the author's flow of thought, argument, or point of his story if we are going to understand what intent his words have.

We trust God's wisdom in communicating in so many different styles and ways, and so as we study expositionally through the Bible, we don't want to flatten the Bible by turning every text into a dry proposition. If the text is a story, tell the story and illustrate it. If the text is a warning, warn. If the text is a vision, paint the picture. If it is a song, show its beauty and poetry. If it is an argument, explain and unfold the argument.

John MacArthur always used to say, teach the Bible in Bible dress. That means to teach what the Bible means using the language of the Bible. It would be possible to teach the truths of a given passage, but to teach them in other words or concepts than the author used. But we miss the power of the text when we do so.

iv. We must understand the original audience

If the goal is understanding what the text meant to the original audience, we have to understand their original situation. What was going on, what was the occasion for writing. Understanding the setting and purpose for writing is key to understanding what the author was seeking to accomplish.

a. What did the author say to the original audience?

We first have to establish who the author was and who the audience was. Then we have to establish what the original composition was. Is it a whole book of the Bible? Was it part of a book (like a Psalm or a Proverb)? Was it multiple books (like the Pentateuch)? We have to first establish the setting and the composition to figure out what was being communicated.

b. Understand the gap between us and the original audience

The books of the Bible were written from around 2000 to 3500 years ago! The language, culture, background, history, setting, and worldview of the original audience were quite different from ours. If we want to understand what the author was intending to do in the recipients' hearts, we have to bridge that gap of understanding. Although the book wasn't written directly *to us* it definitely *applies* to us.

c. What did the author mean to the original audience?

After we discover what the author said, we need to figure out what the author meant by what he said. We have to make sense of what was said. What was being communicated? What sense of the various words is intended? How does the grammar work out? What is the author's flow of thought? How did he structure his composition?

d. Finally we need to discover *why* the author said what he did

We only truly understand the author when we understand the author's intent.

v. Then we can understand the **timeless gospel principles**

Since no book of the Bible was written directly to us, in order to apply the text today, we must always principalize it. What is the truth or principle this passage communicates? What does this teach us about ourselves, or God? What does it teach us about God's heart or plan? What does it teach us about wise living? What theology does it develop in the scope of biblical history? When we understand this, we will then be able to see how that principle applies to us.

Once we answer these key questions about what universal truth the passage teaches, we are very close to be able to apply the passage today. A truth is true whatever the situation. We can hold on to truth. Then we work out truth in our own contexts.

We want to be **principle driven** people, people of conviction in the truths of God's Word who live with integrity and faith.

vi. Then we can apply those truths and principles to our lives in our context

Whatever goal the original author was trying to accomplish in his hearers' lives **will apply** to us in our lives. God's truth is always intended to be lived out. The question is how. Some texts are more geared towards changing our worldview than a specific action. If the point of a text is to change the way we think, we may have to help people think about what to do with that truth. So there are different kinds of application. There are direct applications (where the Bible is directly telling us what to do) and indirect applications (where the Bible is telling us how to think).

B. Discover how each passage ties into the **overall purpose** of the book

Every composition was written by someone to a specific audience for a purpose. This means that every book of the Bible has an **overarching purpose** which everything in the book fits into. In other words, the reason for every word, sentence, paragraph and section in a book is tied to the purpose of the composition as a whole. The author organizes and structures their whole book to accomplish the purpose they have in writing.

Put another way, each book of the Bible is a cohesive argument that the author wrote to affect transformation in the recipients. Each part of the book fits into the overarching goal and purpose that the author had for writing. There may be various threads in a composition, but they all weave together to for a cohesive argument.

This means that to understand any passage in a book, we have to understand the book as a whole. But it's also obviously true that you can't understand the book as a whole without understanding each of the individual parts of it. This means that there is a cyclical process whereby we study each of the sections of a text in order to piece together the point of the whole book. But then that understanding of the whole book is used to refine our understanding of what each of the individual texts mean and how they fit into that overarching purpose. That then helps us better understand the whole book better. And so we keep zooming in and then zooming out, looking at the trees and seeing how they fit into the forest.

Once we understand the purpose of the whole and how all the parts fit into that overarching purpose, we understand the book. We want to see how various **themes** of a book all connect together and interrelate to accomplish the author's overall purpose. Books in the Bible are not a series of unrelated truths, but beautifully threads which are woven together into a coherent tapestry.

Just like how in a good movie all the threads are woven together and come together in the end, every book of the Bible should have all the various passages and themes woven together into a coherent whole. Nothing is irrelevant in any book of the Bible. The more we study the Bible, the more clear it is that every single book of the Bible has a cohesive message and purpose. Our goal is to understand how each part fits into the purpose of the whole.

So as we are reading a book of the Bible we always want to be asking ourselves questions like: What are the themes in this book and how do those themes tie together into an overarching message? How does each passage develop one of the various themes or notes in the book? What are the major plots and sub-plots of the book?

[Advanced] Sometimes people will propose a purpose and flow for a book that sounds good at first glance or on the surface, but doesn't actually fit with the specific words, sentences, and paragraphs that the author wrote. This overarching purpose and flow (sometimes called the meta-narrative) must always be subject to and open to correction from each of the individual interpretations. In that sense the overarching purpose and flow should be a servant to the text, not its master. The overarching purpose and flow should make every individual passage more clear, not less clear. If it is making passages less clear, it is probably not the correct interpretation of the purpose and flow of the book.

IV. Melodic Line

A. The Centrality of Books

One of the clear implications of seeking to understand the author's intent is that when we study the Bible, we should begin by focussing on books of the Bible. Pick a book and seek to master it, or rather, be mastered by it. Know it inside and out. Wrestle with its purpose and themes. See how they connect. We all love certain key verses of the Bible, but they all become so much more clear and rich when we see how they fit in context and are part of the beautiful whole. Topical studies are much harder to do properly because every verse we look at can only be properly understood in context.

Once it is clear to us that an author wrote to an audience for a specific reason, the importance of whole books of the Bible become clear. Each book was written for a specific purpose. Every part of a book fits into the purpose of the letter as a whole. So we are constantly seeking to understand how a given passage fits into the message of the book as a whole. We will come back and talk more about this on the week we dig into structure.

B. Finding the Melodic Line

i. If books are cohesive, there will be key themes

If an author really does have an overall intention with his writing (and he does), then that means that books of the Bible will be cohesive. They will have main themes that run through them. There will be key ideas and concepts. Our goal is to find them.

ii. To trace the themes through a book

Begin by being a good detective, read and re-read the book. As you do so:

- List all the words or ideas repeated throughout a book
- Group related words and ideas together
- Identify which words or ideas seem most significant
- See how the author connects various words and ideas, especially in the same verse
- Wrestle through how the author develops his ideas using these words and ideas
- Synthesize the key themes or ideas by writing a sentences that captures the main ideas and argument of the book

C. The Melodic line of Ephesians

i. **Table Discussion:** What are the most significant or repeated themes of Ephesians 1-4?

ii. The Themes of Ephesians

a. Filling

Ephesians 1:10, 23; 3:19; 4:10, 13; 5:18

b. Head/body

Ephesians 1:10, 22-23; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 15-16; 5:23, 30

c. In Christ/In Him

Ephesians 1:1, 3-4, 7, 9-10, 13, 20; 2:6-7, 10, 13; 3:6, 11-12, 21; 4:21, 32

d. The Spirit/spiritual/heavenly

Ephesians 1:3, 10, 13, 17, 20; 2:2, 6, 18, 22; 3:5, 10, 15, 16; 4:3, 4, 10, 23, 30; 5:18, 19; 6:9, 12, 17, 18

e. God's Purpose/Will

Ephesians 1:1, 5, 9, 11; 3:11; 5:17; 6:6

1. The Mystery

Ephesians 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19

2. Predestined/chose

Ephesians 1:4, 5, 11

3. Administration

Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9

f. Submission/Subject

Ephesians 1:22; 5:21, 22, 24

g. Truth

Ephesians 1:13; 4:15, 21, 24, 25; 5:9; 6:14

h. Love

Ephesians 1:4, 15; 2:4; 3:17, 19; 4:2, 15, 16; 5:2, 25, 28, 33; 6:23, 24

i. Grace

Ephesians 1:2, 6, 7; 2:5, 7, 8; 3:2, 7, 8; 4:7, 29, 32; 6:24

j. Faith/Believe

Ephesians 1:13, 15, 19; 2:8; 3:12, 17; 4:5, 13; 6:16, 23

k. Walk

Ephesians 2:2, 10; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15

iii. Key Verses related to the Melodic Line of Ephesians

Every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies is ours in Christ

Ephesians 1:3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ...

God's eternal plan was to 'head up' all things in creation in Christ

Ephesians 1:9-10

He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him

God's will is to subject everything to the head so that everything is filled with His body

Ephesians 1:22-23

And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

God united Jews and Gentiles into one new man in Christ

Ephesians 2:14-15

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace...

The gospel reveals God's mysterious eternal plan so God's wisdom is revealed in the church

Ephesians 3:8-10

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places.

We are filled with the fulness of God and Christ dwells in us as we comprehend God's love by faith

Ephesians 3:16-19

...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

God's plan is to build up the body of Christ into His stature, through us speaking the truth in love

Ephesians 4:11-16

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

God's Spirit fills us as we are full of thankfulness and joy (and God's Word cf. Col. 3:16)

Ephesians 5:18-21

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

We embody the gospel in marriage, as well as in all our relationships

Ephesians 5:23-24

For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

- iv. **Table Discussion:** Come up with a phrase that puts some of these themes together into a clear statement
- v. Summary of the Melodic Line

Melodic Line of Ephesians: God's eternal plan to sum up all things in Christ

God's eternal plan is to sum up all things in Christ by building up His body through people being filled with Him as the Spirit uses truth spoken in love to make a new man.

What God is doing is so much bigger than any one of us. God is doing something spiritually, and cosmically. It has been a mystery for ages but the fullness of God's glorious plan has been revealed in Christ. God's plan is to fill us with Himself so that we become like Him, and then fill the earth with believers so that Christ will get all the glory for what He does through us.

Our daily lives can seem insignificant, but as we live out the gospel in unity with one another, submitting to and showing grace to one another, building each other up and helping each other grow into Christ, God's cosmic plan to exalt Christ is being worked out. Ephesians is so much about our identity in Christ that gives meaning and purpose to our lives, even in the seemingly insignificant moments.

V. Discussion Questions

Since God communicated through human authors in books, why is finding the Melodic Line essential to understanding a passage?

How did looking for the main themes of Ephesians 1-4 help you to understand how the book fits together? What would happen if you missed the main themes when you interpret a passage?

Read Ephesians 4:11-16 together. How does 4:11-16 fit into the Melodic Line of Ephesians? How does understanding the main themes of Ephesians shed light on the purpose of 4:11-16?