

GRASPING GOD'S WORD

How to Read the
Book: Discourses

Discourses

- A discourse can be a smaller episode within a story (David and Goliath), or it can be the longer story itself (the David narrative). A discourse can be two related paragraphs in one of Paul's letters. It is simply a longer section of Scripture.
- The Bible is not a collection of short, disconnected sentences or unrelated paragraphs. The Bible is a story. Themes are intertwined throughout the text from paragraph to paragraph.

Discourses

- While it is critical to start with the small details at the sentence level, it is also imperative that we move on to the paragraph level and then on to the discourse level. God's message is not restricted to small units of text.
- Everything we have learned about sentences and paragraphs also applies to discourses. Word repetition, cause and effect, general to specific, conjunctions, and so forth—all these are applicable to the study of discourses.

Connections

- Look for repeated words or repeated themes. Look for logical connections like cause and effect. Be sure to note the conjunctions between the paragraphs. In narrative episodes pay attention to the time sequence of each episode.

Connections

- Mark 8:22-26 - And they *came to Bethsaida. And they *brought a blind man to Jesus and *implored Him to touch him. Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying His hands on him, He asked him, “Do you see anything?” And he looked up and said, “I see men, for I see *them* like trees, walking around.” Then again He laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and *began* to see everything clearly. And He sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.”

Connections

- Why does Jesus only heal the man partially at first?
- Is Jesus unable to heal the blind person completely all at once?
- Why does Jesus ask the man if he can see anything? Doesn't he know? Is he uncertain about his healing ability?
- At first the man can see nothing; then he can see partially but not clearly. Finally, Jesus enables him to see clearly. Is there a point to this?

Connections

- Mark 8:14-21 – And they had forgotten to take bread, and did not have more than one loaf in the boat with them. And He was giving orders to them, saying, “Watch out! Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.” They *began* to discuss with one another *the fact* that they had no bread. And Jesus, aware of this, *said to them, “Why do you discuss *the fact* that you have no bread? Do you not yet see or understand? Do you have a hardened heart? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember, when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces you picked up?” They *said to Him, “Twelve.” “When *I broke* the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of broken pieces did you pick up?” And they *said to Him, “Seven.” And He was saying to them, “Do you not yet understand?”

Connections

- Mark 8:27-30 – Jesus went out, along with His disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way He questioned His disciples, saying to them, “Who do people say that I am?” They told Him, saying, “John the Baptist; and others *say* Elijah; but others, one of the prophets.” And He *continued* by questioning them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter **answered* and **said* to Him, “You are the Christ.” And He warned them to tell no one about Him.

Connections

1. All three episodes are basically dialogues.
2. In all three episodes Jesus asks a question.
3. In the first episode (8:14–21) Jesus' dialogue is with his disciples. In the third episode (8:27–30) Jesus' dialogue is also with his disciples. The middle episode (8:22–26) is different: Jesus' dialogue is with a blind man. In other words, the dialogue with the blind man is bracketed on both sides by a dialogue with the disciples. Is there a suggested comparison or contrast?
4. The middle episode (8:22–26) mentions “the village” twice (8:23, 26). The third episode mentions “villages” (8:27).

Connections

5. Jesus ends the blind man episode (8:22–26) by forbidding him to go back into the village. Jesus ends the third episode (8:27–30) by forbidding the disciples to tell anyone about him.

Connections

6. The middle episode (8:22–26) revolves around terms related to seeing. Observe the following repetition:

- a blind man (v. 22)
- the blind man (v. 23)
- he had spit on the blind man's eyes (v. 23)
- “Do you see anything?” (v. 23)
- he looked up (v. 24)

Connections

6. The middle episode (8:22–26) revolves around terms related to seeing. Observe the following repetition:

- “I see people” (v. 24)
- “they look like trees” (v. 24)
- Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes (v. 25)
- his eyes were opened (v. 25)
- his sight was restored (v. 25)
- he saw everything clearly (v. 25)

Connections

7. In light of the terms related to seeing in the blind man episode, it is interesting to note similar terms used in reference to the disciples in the first or preceding episode (8:14–21):
 - “Do you still not see?” (v. 17)
 - “Do you have eyes but fail to see?” (v. 18)

Connections

8. Note that seeing in the blind man episode is being used literally, referring to literal vision. In the first episode, however, seeing is used figuratively, referring to understanding. Jesus makes this particularly clear when he states, “Do you still not see or understand?” (8:17). Jesus repeats this nuance as he ends the episode with the repeated question, “Do you still not understand?” (8:21).

9. Peter’s statement in 8:29, “You are the Messiah,” indicates that Peter now understands who Jesus is, even though others may not. In essence he now sees clearly.

Story Shifts

- As you read larger portions of text, look for critical places where the story seems to take a new turn.
- In the first three chapters of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he presents a doctrinal explanation about the Ephesians' new life in Christ and the implications of that new life, especially regarding the unity of Jews and gentiles in that new life.
- Ephesians 4:1, however, signals a major break, for Paul now begins to give practical exhortations about how the Ephesians ought to put the doctrine of chapters 1–3 into practice. So, while chapters 1–3 deal primarily with doctrine, chapters 4–6 focus on practical living.

Story Shifts

- One way to spot this kind of break is by closely observing the change in verbs. In Ephesians 1–3 Paul uses a large number of “explanatory” or “descriptive” types of verbs. There are almost no imperative verbs in chapters 1–3.

Story Shifts

- who has blessed us (1:3)
- he made known to us the mystery of his will (1:9)
- you were dead in your transgressions and sins (2:1)
- God made us alive (2:5)
- it is by grace you have been saved (2:5)
- God raised us up (2:6)
- he himself is our peace (2:14)
- this mystery is that through the gospel the gentiles are heirs together with Israel (3:6)

Story Shifts

Starting in Ephesians 4:1, however, the imperative verbs dominate:

- be completely humble (4:2)
- make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit (4:3)
- you must no longer live as the gentiles do (4:17)
- put off falsehood (4:25)
- do not give the devil a foothold (4:27)
- be kind and compassionate to one another (4:32)

Story Shifts

Starting in Ephesians 4:1, however, the imperative verbs dominate:

- follow God's example (5:1)
- be filled with the Spirit (5:18)
- husbands, love your wives (5:25)
- put on the full armor of God (6:11)

Story Shifts

- This verb change signals the major shift in the book.
- Overall, the two halves connect as a cause-and-effect relationship. The cause is explained in chapters 1–3 (what Christ has done for us and its implications), while the effect is stated in chapters 4–6 (live in a manner worthy of Christ and all he has done for us).
- A similar major break occurs between Romans 1–11 (doctrine) and Romans 12–16 (practical application).

Interchange

- Interchange involves contrasting or comparing two stories at the same time as part of the overall story development. Usually, the narrative will move back and forth from one story to the other, often to show contrast.
- The early chapters of 1 Samuel do this.

Interchange

- In the first few chapters, the story develops two contrasting families. Eli, the lazy priest, and his two decadent, disobedient sons, Hophni and Phinehas, are contrasted with devout Hannah and her pious, obedient son, Samuel. The two stories unfold at the same time, with the narrative moving back and forth from one to the other.
- Why does the author employ this literary device in the telling of his story? In 1 Samuel the interchange is used to underscore the strong contrast between Samuel and the corrupt priesthood he replaces.

Chiasm

- I got up this morning, got dressed, and drove into town. I worked hard all day, returned home, put on my PJs, and went to bed.

a I got up this morning,
b got dressed,
c and drove into town.
d I worked hard all-day,
c' returned home,
b' put on my PJs,
a' and went to bed.

Chiasm

- Psalm 76:1: God is renowned in Judah; in Israel his name is great.

a God is renowned

b in Judah

b' in Israel

a' his name is great.

Inclusio/Bracketing

- *Inclusio* is when a passage (a story or a poem, etc.) has the same or a similar word, statement, event, or theme at the beginning and at the end. This is also called “bracketing.”
- Psalm 8, for example, opens with, “LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (v. 1). At the very end of the psalm, we find the exact same statement, “LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” These two identical statements “frame” or “bracket” the rest of Psalm 8.
- *Inclusio* also involves similar events or themes. Sometimes the beginning and ending brackets can be separated by several chapters of narrative (e.g., Joshua 3–6).

Discourses

- Because it is God's Word, the Bible is a unique piece of literature. One can dig in it for a lifetime and not exhaust it.
- Likewise, when we study the Bible, we are engaging in a conversation with the infinite God. He himself is neither simple nor easily grasped by just skimming surface information.
- He has provided us with his written Word, which is rich and deep and sometimes complex, so that we will know him more and more.