LESSON 3 Prepare the Material

In the last lesson we considered personal preparation for ministering. This lesson will focus on the preparation of material for preaching and teaching.

The Bible is God's message to people. As such, it is the primary source of material for preaching and teaching. As you preach and teach it is important to follow Paul's words to Timothy on ministering the truth: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). In this lesson you will learn about two important aspects of interpreting Scripture: 1) the use of context, and 2) the importance of literal and figurative language. These will help you properly prepare sermons and lessons, and effectively communicate God's truth to others.

The last part of this lesson offers practical help in gathering and organizing material in a systematic way.

lesson outline

Use of Context

Questions to Provoke Thought

Literal and Figurative Language

Gathering and Organizing Material

lesson objectives

When you finish this lesson you should be able to:

1. Demonstrate the proper use of context to determine the meaning of a Scripture passage.

2. Describe the use of the setting of Scripture to interpret Bible passages.

3. Distinguish between literal and figurative language of Scripture.

4. Explain how and why you should construct a sermon garden.

learning activities

1. Study the lesson development and answer the study questions in the usual manner.

2. Learn the meaning of key words that are new to you.

3. Take the self-test at the end of the lesson and check your answers carefully with those supplied at the back of this study guide. Review any items you answer incorrectly.

4. Carefully review Unit 1 (Lessons 1–3), then complete the unit student report for Unit I and send it to your instructor.

key words

context	literal
figurative	simile

lesson development

Use of Context

Context Defined

The context of a scriptural portion includes all that surrounds it. The verses, paragraphs, and chapters before and after a text make up its immediate context. The extended context consists of that portion of Scripture less closely related to the passage and may embrace paragraphs, a chapter, or even an entire book of Scripture. Use of context to interpret Scripture will help you to prepare lessons and sermons that are true to biblical truth. Errors in doctrine and practice are made when a single verse of Scripture is taken out of context and given the wrong meaning. So-called "proof texts" often are passages of Scripture taken out of setting and used to "prove" something someone wants to believe. The Bible warns that ignorant and unstable people may give false explanations of Scripture (2 Peter 3:16) and encourages those who minister to seek God's approval by correctly teaching the message of God's truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

Application

1 Scriptural context may be defined best as the
a) attempt to attach a certain meaning to a portion of Scripture based on one's own view of the Bible.
b) obvious meaning of a certain verse as it stands by itself.
c) setting of a Scripture, including the verses, paragraphs, and chapters before and after it.

Context Illustrated

Objective 1.   *Demonstrate the proper use of context to determine the meaning of a Scripture passage.*

As a single thread does not show all the pattern of a tapestry, so a single verse of Scripture does not give all the meaning of

truth. However, as with tapestry, the full pattern of truth is seen when all the threads of Scripture are properly woven together. When you use the context, the Bible is the best interpreter of its own truths. This is commonly called "the analogy of faith." Let us see how the context can be used to interpret Scripture.

Read the Parable of the Weeds in Matthew 13:24–30. Notice that when the crowd left, Jesus explained the parable to His disciples. Now read the context (Matthew 13:36–43) for Jesus' interpretation of the parable. Most parables are self-explanatory if you pay careful attention to the context.

Application

2 Read Luke 11:5–10 and answer the following questions.
a) The central theme of this passage is . . . .
b) Through the use of this parable Jesus teaches that

. . . .

A detailed account of Jesus' visit to Jerusalem for the Feast of Shelters is given in John 7:10–39. On the last day of the feast Jesus stood up and cried with a loud voice, "'Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him'" (v. 38). These words are explained in the context by John, the inspired author: "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified" (v. 39). The explanation given by the context is the correct interpretation because the writer states this directly in the Scripture.

Application

3   Read John 2:13–20 and answer the following question in context. When Jesus said that the Jews would "'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days'" (v. 19), He was referring to
a) a miracle He was capable of performing to show His miracle working power.
b) the destruction of the temple by the Romans and to three thousand years of history that would pass before He would rebuild it.
c) His body, a fact which the disciples understood only after He was raised from death.

Words Defined by Context

The context can be helpful in finding the meaning of words. We must be careful to let the context of a word determine its meaning and importance because the context of a word limits its meaning and keeps it from being interpreted in more than one sense. Mark 12:18 tells about the beliefs of the Sadducees: "Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question." Acts 23:8 amplifies this information and includes a statement about the beliefs of the Pharisees.

Application

4   For the use of context to determine the meaning of words read the following Scriptures and give the meaning supplied by the context for each word indicated in italics.
a) In Matthew 1:23 the word *Immanuel* means

. . . .
b) In Matthew 1:21 the word *Jesus* means

. . . .
c) In Matthew 27:33 the word *Golgotha* means

. . . .
d) In Mark 3:17 the word *Boanerges* means

. . . .

QUESTIONS TO PROVOKE THOUGHT

What Is the Setting?

Objective 2. *Describe the use of the setting of Scripture to interpret Bible passages.*

You will better understand what the Scriptures mean if you know the setting of the writing or speaking. Nearly every utterance Jesus made was a response to circumstances. His teaching on the new birth was an answer to the inner need of a religious man (John 3:1–21). His discourse on the "Water of Life" was given by a well to a spiritually thirsty woman (John 4:1–30). When the disciples returned from the Samaritan village, Jesus was prompted to instruct them about food and the will of God (John 4:31–35) and the need for laborers in the harvest (John 4:36–38). In each instance the setting is important to full understanding of the teaching.

Application

5 Read each of the following Scriptures and write in your notebook the setting for each.
a) John 6:35–40
b) Matthew 19:27

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Jesus' teaching on lost things (sheep, coin, a son) in Luke 15:4–32 can be better understood when you know the circumstances that prompted His stories. Luke introduced this teaching by saying, "Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' Then Jesus told them this parable" (Luke 15:1–3). The attitude of the shepherd, the woman, and the father toward lost things is in sharp contrast to the attitude of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. However, the anger of the elder son toward his forgiven brother is a perfect example of the attitude of the Pharisees toward the sinners Jesus forgave.

Application

6 The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37) was given

a) in response to a lawyer's question: "'Who is my neighbor?'"

b) because the question of "how to be a good neighbor" had been asked by the Twelve.

c) to a teacher who did not understand community responsibility.

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It is important to understand the circumstances under which the books of the Bible were written. For instance, the book of Romans was written with Paul's desire to visit the church at Rome weighing heavy on his heart (Romans 1:8–15). The Corinthian letters were written in response to what Paul had been told and what the people had written to him about the needs and problems of the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11; 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1).

Words or phrases in the text sometimes suggest a major division or turn of events. For example, at Caesarea Philippi Jesus began a new phase in His ministry to the disciples (Matthew 16:21). What caused this major change in His teachings? The answer is found in the context when Simon Peter said, "'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'" (Matthew 16:16). Jesus had spent nearly half of His ministry teaching them He was the Messiah. When that truth was understood, He immediately began to teach them that as the Messiah He must suffer, die, and be raised again. Seeing this major turn of events will help us understand the emphasis on His death, which is given in the following chapters of Matthew.

Sometimes the divisions of a book can be detected by the repetition of phrases or words. For example, see 1 Corinthians 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1. Two of the major shifts in ministry in the book of Acts are recorded in Acts 8:1 and Acts 13:46.

Certain words or phrases repeated emphasize meanings to the passages. One of the repetitions of Matthew's Gospel is the idea,

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet." This is repeated in Matthew 1:22; 2:15; 2:17; 2:23, etc.

Ask yourself questions about the setting of the Scriptures you are studying. Some of those questions might include: What are the circumstances? What caused this to be done or said? Why are these words repeated? To whom is this spoken, written, and why? Go to the context for the answers. It will enrich your understanding of the passage and give you examples and illustrations to use in preaching and teaching.

Application

7   Describe how the setting of Scripture helps us to interpret Bible passages.

. . . .

. . . .

Who Is Speaking?

"'Curse God and die!'" (Job 2:9). If these words sound strange coming from the Bible, it is because you may not know who said them and under what circumstances. Job's wife made this statement when she saw her husband's terrible condition after he lost all but his life. The context shows that Job rejected her words and remained firm in his faith in God. It will help you to correctly interpret the statement if you know who is speaking and under what circumstances. Identify a speaker as a godly or a wicked person, for both are recorded in Scripture. The words of the devil (Genesis 3:1–5; Matthew 4:1–11, etc.), along with the words of evil men like King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:28–30) and Haman (Esther 3:8–9), are in the Bible. Obviously, you would consider the words of wicked people differently from those of the godly. All Scripture is inspired by God, but all the people who speak in the Bible were not intended to be our examples. For this reason it is important to know who is speaking.

Application

8   Compare Ecclesiastes 1:1–2 with Nehemiah 13:26 and answer the following questions.

a) Who is speaking in Ecclesiastes 1:1–2?

. . . .

b) What are the circumstances surrounding his views in Ecclesiastes?

. . . .

. . . .

c) For what reason does Nehemiah use the example of Solomon's fall?

. . . .

. . . .

Additionally, when you read the Psalms or the prophets, keep a sharp eye open as to whether a man or God is speaking. For example, in Psalm 91, the author is speaking in verses 1–13 while God speaks in verses 14–16. Again, in Habakkuk 1 and 2, the dialogue goes back and forth from the prophet and God. It is vital you note who is speaking as you study.

Sometimes the words spoken will take on added meaning when you see the circumstances and know the person speaking. For instance, Peter's defense for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 11:1–18) is all the more meaningful when you realize how strongly he opposed the vision God gave him (Acts 10:8–21) before he went to preach to Gentiles at Cornelius' house. The words of Paul concerning his faithfulness to the vision God gave him (Acts 26:19) are more impressive when you realize how much he suffered to be obedient to the vision (2 Corinthians 11:22–30). When he wrote to the Philippian church saying he had learned to be content with whatever conditions he faced (Philippians 4:12–13), he was writing from a prison cell (Philippians 1:12–14). It is important to know the character of the

person who is speaking when you read what is said. The context will make this clear and give life and power to your preaching.

Application

9 Select the statement below that best explains why you should know who is speaking when you consider the meaning of a Scripture portion.

a) It is helpful in the interpretation of Scripture to know who is speaking because this lets us know whether we should accept the statement as true.

b) It is all-important to know who said a thing and under what circumstances because this enables us to know if it is a command to be followed or simply a statement that does not concern our relationship to God.

c) Knowing who said a thing and under what circumstances is important only for getting the total picture, not for evaluating its worth.

Literal and Figurative Language

Explained

Objective 3. *Distinguish between literal and figurative language in Scriptures.*

Literal language is the normal, ordinary use of words and phrases. As a general rule, you should take the words of the Bible at their usual, primary, literal meaning. Only when language is obviously not literal should you seek a figurative meaning. There is no reason to doubt that Eden, Adam and Eve, Noah, Jonah, the nation of Israel, the church, or the New Jerusalem are literal persons, places, and things. The literal language of Scripture is not difficult to understand.

Figurative language is the representation of one thing in terms generally used to mean another. In the Bible, God is presented as a rock, a fortress, and a shield. Israel is referred to as a vineyard, a good man as a tree flourishing by the riverside, and the devil as a roaring

lion who goes about to seize its prey. Figurative language is common in all cultures as a medium of communication that adds understanding. The Bible uses for its teaching word pictures drawn from everyday life in the home and from the countryside. This makes it possible to relate the Word to ordinary human interests. Thus the Bible truth makes an impression on the mind and can be easily remembered.

Figures of speech are scattered throughout the Bible and are not always easy to detect and understand. How can you tell if a passage is figurative or literal? Here is the simple rule: Scripture must be taken literally whenever possible; it is figurative only if it cannot be accepted as literal. Context and common sense will help you decide whether a given passage is literal or figurative. Even figurative language conveys a literal truth. To understand figurative language we should examine the way it is used in Scripture and we need to study carefully the background of both Old and New Testaments. Only in this way can we understand the figures of speech that are used.

One of the most common figures of speech is the simile. Similes are expressed comparisons of two different things or ideas in which something is said to be "like" or "as" something. See Psalm 103:13–16 and Proverbs 26:14 (KJV) for examples.

Application

10 In the examples below indicate whether each statement uses figurative or literal language by placing 1 for literal and 2 for figurative in spaces in the left column.

. . . **a** Jacob went up from there and lived at Bethel.

. . . **b** Like a lamb about to be slaughtered . . . He never said a word.

. . . **c** All the floodgates of the sky were opened.

. . . **d** Long ago, in the days before Israel had a king, there was a famine in the land.

Illustrated

Nicodemus was puzzled when Jesus said that a man must be born again to see the kingdom of God (John 3:1–8). His response was, "'How can a man be born when he is old? . . . Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!'" (v. 4). Jesus was using figurative language, but Nicodemus was taking Him literally. A similar thing happened with the woman of Samaria: she thought Jesus was referring to water from Jacob's well when He talked about life-giving water (John 4:7–15).

Sometimes people create problems by taking figurative expressions literally. When Jesus referred to His flesh as bread, the crowd argued (John 6:48–52). They asked, "'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" (v. 52). Jesus then referred to His flesh as food and His blood as drink. At this, many of His disciples stopped following Him because the saying was hard to understand (John 6:60–66). Common sense would tell you (even if the context did not) that Jesus would not literally feed them His flesh and give them His blood to drink. Peter understood this. When the crowd went away he expressed his confidence that Jesus' words gave eternal life (John 6:66–69). Even today among some believers there is misunderstanding on this matter. Some say that the bread and wine of Communion become literally the blood and body of the Lord Jesus. The fact is that Jesus was speaking figuratively, teaching us that through the suffering He would endure in His body and the shedding of His blood on the Cross, spiritual life would provided to humanity.

Application

11 Read Matthew 26:26–28 and 1 Corinthians 11:23–29. Now complete the following questions.

a) When Jesus said of the bread, "'This is my body,'" He meant

that the broken bread was . . . .

b) When Jesus declared of the cup that "'This is my blood of the covenant,'" He meant that

. . . .

Using figurative language, Jesus took advantage of real events to teach spiritual truths on several occasions: the feast day and the living water (John 7:37–39), the healing of the blind man (John 9:1–41), the death of Lazarus (John 11:1–27), and washing the disciples' feet (John 13:1–17). When you read these passages did you easily separate the literal happenings from the figurative language?

Application

12 Sometimes it is not easy to tell if the passage is literal or figurative. In Matthew 19:16–26; Mark 10:17–27; and Luke 18:18–27, read Jesus' words about a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

a) Is this literal or figurative? . . . .

b) Can you determine this on the basis of the context, of common sense, or both?

. . . .

c) What is the lesson taught in this illustration, whether the language is literal or figurative?

. . . .

. . . .

GATHERING AND ORGANIZING MATERIAL

How to Start a "Sermon Garden"

Objective 4.   *Explain how and why you should construct a sermon garden.*

Material for preaching and teaching must be gathered, filed in an orderly way, and kept for use when needed. Just as food must be gathered to prepare a meal, so material must be gathered to prepare sermons and lessons. It is equally important to be able to find the material quickly when you need it. For that, a filing system is needed.

You can set up a simple system with some folders on your computer. One way to do this is to create a folder entitled "Sermons"

on your hard drive. Various subfolders can be created within your "Sermons" folder for illustrations, sermon ideas, sermon outlines, completed sermons, etc. Each complete sermon should be a separate file with its own name, carefully placed in an appropriate folder. Each sermon document should include a title, date, and place (where you preached it). This will be extremely helpful in case you ever feel inclined to rework it and preach it again at a later date. It will also help avoid the mistake of preaching the sermon twice in the same place!

Hint: although you may not want to preach from a manuscript, it is an excellent idea to write out your sermon word for word, especially when you are a less-experienced preacher. This way, you force yourself to think through what you are going to say and polish your thoughts.

If you do not have a computer, a portable file or small file cabinet will also work to store sermon fodder and completed messages. Some preachers keep their finished sermons in three or four-ring binders in some organized fashion such as by date, by topic, by series, etc. Never throw away a sermon or teaching you have prepared. Even if you are not satisfied with it today, you may find some material to reuse at another date.

Most sermons "grow" from seed thoughts or Scriptures that seem filled with meaning at the moment. These ideas, gathered from reading, observation, experience, need, and so forth, can be kept and eventually developed into sermons. The steps that follow constitute one way of organizing a "Sermon Garden" to use in developing sermons from the idea stage to full growth.

Application

13 The reason we refer to the systematic collecting, filing, and developing of sermon material as a "Sermon Garden" is that
a) preaching and teaching is much like gardening.
b) the variety in sermon themes is very much like gardening.
c) most sermons "grow," "develop," and "come to maturity" much like the process in a vegetable garden.

Step 1.   Label one tile folder "Seeds." This folder will contain all your ideas for sermons. Keep a small pad in your pocket and at your bedside for jotting down ideas when they come. Transfer them to uniform size sheets and put them in the "Seeds" file. These are the beginnings of sermons. Some you will use; others you will discard. But each one needs to be kept and considered.

Step 2.   Label another folder "Stalk." When an idea begins to grow you will move it from the "Seeds" to the "Stalk" file. As material is being added and the idea is gaining in size and strength it is becoming the stalk of a sermon. More than one file may be needed as you work on more than one sermon at a time.

Step 3.   Label a third file "Fruit." This file contains the finished or nearly finished sermon. This is the fruit of your labor. The idea is developed; the seed has fully grown.

You can use the same file to gather information and illustrations to use in preparing sermons. You will need four folders, one for each of the following topics: "Salvation," "Reconciliation," "Sanctification," and "Hope." Use one file folder for each of these topics. These are four major preaching topics we will consider in lesson five. Illustrations and information can be gathered and tiled in one of these four folders. Some of your materials for sermons will be taken from these sources. (Of course, you will want to have many more files than just four. Sermons on family, emotional issues, healing, etc. require their own folder.)

You will need another file for sermons which have been preached. Label the folder "Sermons." Keep a list inside the file with the following headings: Sermon number, Topic (one of the four), Bible text, Date preached, and Place preached. Fill in the information for each sermon as it is filed. Keep them in numerical order for quick reference. After 50 to 100 sermons, or a year of preaching, begin another file.

This is a simple system that can be modified as needed. You can use it, change it, or get another one, but begin immediately to gather and file your ideas and material in a systematic way. It will make your preparation for preaching and teaching easier and more profitable.

Another good idea is to purchase a wide-margin Bible. Whenever you read a book that illuminates a verse in the Scripture, write down the book title and page number in the wide-margin Bible. This will be invaluable to you in a few years.

Application

14 Explain how and why you should construct a sermon garden.

. . . .
. . . .

self-test

TRUE-FALSE. Place a T in front of the statements that are true and an F in front of those that are false.

. . . **1** The context of a Scripture includes all that surrounds it.

. . . **2** Errors in doctrine and practice are made when a single verse of Scripture is taken out of context and given a wrong meaning.

. . . **3** The full pattern of truth is seen when a few of the threads of Scripture are properly woven together.

. . . **4** Most parables are fairly easy to explain if one carefully pays attention to the context.

. . . **5** The context is useful in determining the meaning of scriptural passages, but context does not help greatly in finding the meaning of individual words.

. . . **6** It is much easier to understand what the Scriptures mean if we know the setting of the speech, writing, event, etc.

. . . **7** Books of the Bible deal with such universal topics that we really do not profit by understanding the conditions under which they were written.

. . . **8** The use of certain repeated words or phrases often signal a change of topic or emphasis.

. . . **9** As long as words appear in the Bible, it is not really necessary for us to be concerned about who said them and under what conditions.

. . . **10** In determining what Scriptures are to be our rule of faith and practice, it is necessary for us to know what God has communicated to us to direct us.

. . . **11** An overall guide to use in determining whether Scripture is to be interpreted as literal or figurative is this: Scripture must be taken literally unless it cannot be accepted as literal.

. . . **12** When Scripture says, "So I will attack you like a roaring lion," we understand that this is to be taken literally.

. . . **13** Figurative language may be described as symbolic.

. . . **14** One of the primary reasons why we need a "Sermon Garden" is that ideas often come to us when we do not have time to fully develop them.

. . . **15** Making a "Sermon Garden" is a discipline that helps you develop the materials you need for ministry before you need them.

Before you continue with Lesson 4, be sure to complete your unit student report for Unit 1 and return the answer sheet to your GU instructor.

answers to study questions

8 a) Solomon

   b) Though he had once been a great and godly king, he fell into sin and developed this terribly pessimistic attitude toward life.

   c) He uses this example to warn the returned exiles lest they repeat Solomon's awful mistake.

1 c) setting of a Scripture, including the verses, paragraphs, and chapters before and after it.

9 b) It is all-important to know who said a thing . . .

2 a) prayer.

   b) when one prays he must be persistent (see James 5:17, Elijah prayed earnestly).

10 a 1) Literal language

   b 2) Figurative language

   c 2) Figurative language

   d 1) Literal language

3 c) His body, a fact that the disciples understood only after He was raised from death. (We gather this truth from verses 21 and 22.)

11 a) a symbol of His body that would be broken for us. Isaiah says, "The punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

   b) the cup was a symbol of His blood that was to be sacrificially given to blot out the sins of all humanity.

4 a) God is with us

   b) He will save His people from their sins

   c) The place of the Skull

   d) Sons of Thunder

12 a) Figurative

    b) Context

    c) That those who love riches have great difficulty in surrendering their lives and their substance to the Lordship of Christ.

5 a) Jesus gave this teaching when the multitudes followed Him because of their desire to see the miraculous feeding of 5,000 men duplicated.

    b) The disciples had just heard Jesus tell a rich man to sell all his possessions and follow Him. When the man left, Jesus said that it would be hard for rich people to enter the kingdom. Then Peter asked, "What will we have since we have left all?"

13 c) most sermons "grow," "develop," and "come to maturity" much like the process in a vegetable garden.

6 a) in response to a lawyer's question: "Who is my neighbor?"

14 Using a few folders, one can separate sermon "Seeds" one wishes to develop later and keep them safe and in order. As these "seeds" are developed, they are placed in the "Stalk" folder with other developing sermon ideas. Finally, the finished sermons are placed in the "Fruit" file for future use. This practice is a discipline that makes us conscious of our ongoing need to have a reserve of preaching materials to use as occasions permit.

7 Your answer. The setting of Scriptures helps us to understand the circumstances under which they were written, the matters they were intended to correct, to whom they were written, and the primary purpose.

Unit 2

The Ministry of Preaching