

Getting the “Big Picture,” Discerning the Message of a Bible Book

This phase of the study aims to identify the author’s central idea (unifying theme) and how that theme is logically developed through the book. This involves observing the theme and structure of each paragraph in the book and then determining how they together communicate the message of the book. It is still personal observation based on what we are able to see first-hand as we read the book carefully and thoughtfully.

Synthesis. Last class we handed out summaries for every paragraph in Galatians. Our follow-up was to group the paragraphs, that is, combine them in logical groups. They should be united by a common theme or idea. What did you discover in Galatians?

Discerning Paul’s purpose and central idea in Galatians

1. What does Paul introduce or emphasize in the opening paragraphs of Galatians? Are there repeated words or phrases?
2. What is Paul’s reason for writing this letter? Does Paul state his reason for writing? If so, what is that reason? All of the book should contribute to Paul’s reason/theme. If no purpose is stated, is there an idea that is emphasized or appears repeatedly?
3. Is there a key statement (defining verse) in Galatians? Paul is writing for a purpose and has that central idea in mind as he writes. What verse or sentence states Paul’s central idea most clearly?
4. Test your proposed theme (central idea) by reading the book through to see if everything in the book supports and contributes to that central, unifying idea. If it does you have probably identified the author’s central idea. If it fails this test, review and revise your proposed theme (everything must conform to the Scripture).

Discovering Paul’s plan (how Galatians is organized)

1. Where and how does the content change (the thought develop) within Galatians? Are there significant changes in people, subject, or tone? What kind of progression does Paul use? (Biographical, geographical, chronological, historical, or logical?)
2. Are there logical connectors that mark the progression? Are there repeated words or phrases that identify Paul’s thought process in Galatians? What other literary features are used to mark the progression of Paul’s thought in Galatians?
3. How do the summary statements for each paragraph correlate with the central idea? Everything should harmonize with the central idea and Paul’s thought process.

“Wrapping up” How to Study the Bible

This is our opportunity to apply the previous sessions to one particular Bible book!
During December we will be doing a personal “hands-on” study of the book of Titus.

A. **Exploration** is the first step. Read Titus several times and answer the following,

1. What do we learn about the author, Paul?
2. What do we learn about the man, Titus?
3. What do we learn about the church at Crete?
4. How would you describe the people, culture, and conditions of Crete?
5. What was Paul’s reason for writing this letter to Titus?

B. **Analysis** is the second step (next week). Write a summary for each paragraph.

1:1-4,

1:5-9,

1:10-16

2:1-10

2:11-15

3:1-11

3:12-14

3:15

C. **Organization** will be our third step, but not until our next class.

1. Write a theme statement for the book of Titus (what Titus is all about).
2. Select one verse that best expresses that theme (central idea).
3. What 5 or 6 words are repeated often or represent the message of Titus?

Some tips for teachers

3. Write an outline incorporating the central idea and paragraph summaries.

The next step is to prepare an outline of the book. This is an important step for those interested mastering the message of a Bible book and essential for teaching it.

First, gather the paragraphs into logical groups (chapter or section). The shorter the book the fewer the divisions, the longer the book, the more divisions you may have.

Second, write a title (summary statement) for each of these major sections. Wherever there is a significant change of subject it should be reflected by the beginning of a new section whether or not it coincides with a chapter division. This process is known as the **inductive** method for determining the structure and outline of the book. It is inductive in that it seeks to determine the author's argument from the book itself. Once the major section (chapter) headings have been determined, formulate an outline. It should be built around the central idea of the book and follow the logical progression of the author's thought as he develops that theme. An outline has one point for each of your divisions. In longer books you may wish to have sub points under these headings, but keep them clear and simple.

Third, evaluate and coordinate these titles. They should be:

- a. **Consistent** with the content and theme (the message) of the book,
- b. **Cohesive**, uniting everything around the author's central theme,
- c. **Comprehensive**, encompassing every section of the book,
- d. **Progressive**, reflecting the author's structural progression: (biographical—in 2 Samuel; historical—in Kings and Chronicles; chronological and geographical—Exodus and Acts; or logical—Romans and Galatians).
- e. **Symmetrical**: parallel statements harmonizing with each other and united around the theme of the book.
- f. **Meaningful** and memorable. It must be compelling without being either clever or cute. Avoid excessive use of alliteration.

4. Apply the Finishing Touch! Organize your observations and analyses.

- a. **Book title**: try to capture the theme of the book in one phrase or clause that is easily remembered and communicates the message of that book. It should be unique to this one book and identify it immediately from all other Bible books. Example: Galatians: Paul's defense of the gospel of justification by faith alone.
- b. **Key verse**: determine the verse that best embodies the book's theme. Example, Acts 1:8 contains the theme and the outline of Acts.
John 20:30-31 explains what John wrote about and why he wrote.
Mark 10:45 – *Jesus came to serve and give His life a ransom...*
- c. **Key words**: note words that occur frequently and appear to have a significant bearing on the message of the book. List 4 to 6 of the most important words and the number of times they occur in the book.
- d. **Unique features**: note unusual things you have found in the book. For example: the absence of the name of God in Esther. List ideas, themes, and words you want to study later in greater detail.