

“More Genres: Letters”

How to Study the Bible
Various Scriptures
The Rev. Jeff Stivason, Ph.D.
July 8, 2022

Jeff: Don has something to say; I don't know what it is.

Don Maurer: Jeff, I'm sure that you're familiar with this scenario. A mom comes into her son's room on a Sunday morning. “Johnny, come on; it's time to go to church.”

“I don't wanna go to church!”

“Well, you're gonna have to go to church.”

“I don't wanna! Why?”

“Well, for three reasons. #1, I'm your mother; you'll obey me. #2, you're fifty-two years old and you're still living at home. (*Laughter*) And #3, you're the pastor.

(*Laughter*)

Sig Tragard: Does this apply to anyone we know in the room?

Don: Maybe; I don't know.

Jeff: I'm surprised he didn't say the names have been changed to protect—(*Laughter*)

Sig: As you know, we do record this. So I'll run around with a mike for you so we can hear you on the recording when you talk.

Jeff: Yea.

Don: I was thinking of something. Since we have these prayer requests,--

Jeff: (*pointing to Roger Myers*): Can you do anything with him, sitting that close to him?

Don: No, no, no. I was thinking of singing the first verse of “It Is Well With My Soul.” Do we all know the words to that hymn?

Brave Man: I think so. (*The men sing*):

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
“It is well, it is well with my soul.”
It is well, it is well,
With my soul, with my soul.
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Jeff: All right. Thanks, Don; that was really nice. All right, let's pray.

Father in heaven, we give You thanks. And we do delight in knowing that it is well with our souls before You because You are a God who is sovereign. You are providential over all the affairs of life. Father, we thank You that nothing escapes Your grasp. The heart of the king is in Your hand and You direct it like a water course. The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is Yours. And Father, we are thankful that not a sparrow falls from the sky apart from Your will. These things are things that we are thankful for, not simply because they demonstrate your sovereignty, but because we are reminded by them that we are kept in the hand of a Father who loves us and who has the power to keep us.

And so, Father, as we bow before You this morning, we are reminded of Your gentle care. We ask that You'll continue to be with Kevin Cohn. We pray, Father, that You will

“More Genres: Letters”

grant him that same peace of mind that You’ve been bestowing upon him. And we pray, Father, that as he draws near to his own end that You would give him a mind of peace.

Father, we pray for Paul Deffenbaugh, that You would heal him. We pray for Charlie, that You would be with him and that You would help him to finish his recovery well from the pneumonia that he has struggled against.

Father, we pray for Bruce. We certainly ask that You would preserve him. But at this time we pray for Becky. And as she looks forward to surgery we ask that You will be with the doctors and guide their hands. And certainly, Lord, we pray for her full recovery.

Lord, we ask that You will be with us today as we study Your word. Father, we ask that as we study it that Your Spirit would be upon us and working in us. And we pray, Father, that You would delight to fashion us according to Your likeness. Father, we ask these things, all of them, in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen.

Jeff: All right. Well we are looking today at another portion of this section on genres—different sorts of literature. When we look at the Bible we’re looking at different types of literature. And today we come to what we might describe as the letters. And this is most of the New Testament.

And again I just want you to think about this. When you come to different parts of the Bible, if you’re not used to thinking this way, you may be surprised to find that there are parts of genres in certain books that you might not expect. For instance when you look at the book of Revelation you think of it as an apocalyptic book. But if you remember back to chapters 2 and 3, what do they have in them? They contain seven letters to seven churches. And so the genre of letters is in the book of Revelation.

For instance, when you think about Jeremiah—I think it’s chapter 29—what is Jeremiah chapter 29 but a letter written to the exiles? And so there are different genres in other books that we have a tendency to think of predominantly as one genre.

So for instance we’ve already said this about prophecy. We’ve said that there is history in prophecy, and we should expect to find some historical narratives. Well, the same is true with regard to letters. So letters are a big deal, and we ought to expect, as we look at the different books in the Bible, to see these different genres altogether.

So for instance, again let me just say it like this. You’re looking at a book. And you say, well, I’m going to look at this book which is prophetic. And yet there are different aspects to the book.

There’s a historical aspect and maybe just a historical narrative in its entirety. For instance there’s the historical narrative in Isaiah where the king Hezekiah meets with the Babylonian envoys. You know, that’s just a purely historical account. And there is poetry in prophecy and there is certainly law, law applied in prophecy.

So there are all these different genres. And you have to keep that in mind as you look at different books. And so we’re going to look at letters this morning.

When you look at letters there’s a typical form that they take. I don’t know; maybe it’s just thinking back on it. When I was in school our teachers taught us that letters had a certain form to them, you know? And part of that form was that you indent paragraphs. Today people don’t even indent paragraphs. I don’t even know if there’s a form for anything today, right? Really; I’m not kidding.

Ted Wood: They don’t capitalize or punctuate.

“More Genres: Letters”

Jeff: They don't. I mean—

Don: I do.

Jeff: Oh, listen to Don! (*Laughter*) Don's the walking encyclopedia; like we're surprised by this, okay? (*Laughter*)

Ted: Don is righteous according to the law.

Brave Men: Oh! (*Laughter*)

Jeff: But there is a certain structure that you find in any of the letters that you open up. And so when you come to certain letters and you don't find these things, it's a bit surprising. For instance you find a greeting, a thanksgiving, a prayer. Paul says, “I pray for you continually.” There's a body, and then there's a conclusion of some sort. When there's an absence of one of these main divisions, it's surprising.

For instance, if I were to say to you that if you've done much study in the New Testament recently, to jog your memory, the book that is most surprising is Galatians. There's no real greeting; there's no warm greeting. Paul just launches right into the body of the text. And he is very disappointed with the Galatians, and so on. And that's striking, because there is no introduction; there's no real warm greeting and thanksgiving and prayer, and so on.

So those kinds of things are interesting. You can look for them and you can use this particular breakdown as your outline as you outline a different letter.

There are some different characteristics of letters. And certainly grammar is important in any one of these letters. When you think about grammar, one of the things that you have a tendency to think about is anything you'd like to run away from. It's just a joke. The bishop got it, but Don had to catch on slowly. (*Laughter*) Anyway, when you think about grammar this is the struggle, right?

When you look at the Greek New Testament, one of the things that you see in the book of Revelation is that you see poorer grammar; it's written in haste; it's not easy to read. Sentences are broken. When you read 1 John you're reading the easiest grammar in the New Testament. And they're both written by the same guy! What accounts for that? Well, I think that what probably accounts for it is a guy scribbling away, you know, as he sees these visions. I think that's it in part. He's on Patmos; he's on an island, you know?

But the difference is that when you look at it in the English you really don't see that kind of thing. And I think you don't see it because the translators are trying to help us out as they translate it as they go.

I think *Calvin and Hobbes* is helpful at this point. Calvin says, “I need help with my homework. What's a pronoun?”

And the tiger says, “A noun that lost its amateur status.” (*Laughter*) And they just kind of look, and Calvin says, “Maybe I can get a point for originality.” (*Laughter*) I just love that.

Anyway, when you think about certain things that you need to keep in mind as you interpret the Scriptures, let's just walk through some of these things first of all. Go ahead.

Don: Yes. Isn't that the debate that some people, even in the early centuries, had about 1 and 2 Peter? 1 Peter was really polished Greek and 2 Peter wasn't so polished. How could they have been written by the same person?

Jeff: Yes, of course, and this is the thing. When you look at the book of Hebrews, it's probably the best grammar in the New Testament—highly structured and really polished

“More Genres: Letters”

—different from what you might find in 1 John. But unless you have anything else to say about that I’ll just let that go. Okay.

Sig: Jeff?

Jeff: Yes?

Sig: Grammar written a couple thousand years ago versus the grammar that we know and long learned in school, is there a difference?

Jeff: Yes. I mean, this is really funny. When I teach Greek at the seminary one of the things that I think is very interesting about it is that most of the students don’t know a lot of English grammar coming in. And so they actually learn more English grammar learning Greek than they ever have in their lives. And that’s a really fascinating thing.

But the other thing is this. When you learn English grammar you have to learn English grammar so that you can take what you read in Greek and then translate it and put it into easily understood sentences: the noun comes first and then the verb, then the direct object, and so on. But when you look at the Greek, the interesting thing is that that’s not the way the grammar is in Greek. In Greek it’s the verb first, then it’s the noun, and then it’s the direct object. And so it’s a bit different. And oftentimes, even in the New Testament, it doesn’t follow that pattern. That’s the typical pattern of Greek sentences. But the New Testament oftentimes does not follow the typical patterns of writing—verb, noun, direct object. Oftentimes it’s different than that. Yes?

Brave Man: Are you saying that in the Greek it does not follow the same structure in the different translations?

Jeff: Typically in the Greek, what a Greek sentence looks like is verb, noun, and then an object. And oftentimes that’s not what you find in the Greek in the New Testament. Oftentimes what you find is that you find a verb, you find an object, you find a noun; it’s a different pattern. But because it’s an inflected language—

Ted: Which is?

Jeff: An inflected language tells you by the ending what part of speech it is. So for instance I tell my students that want you want to do when you’re translating—when they’re first starting off—I tell them that what you want to do is rummage around in the sentence for the noun. And how do you find the noun? Well, if your mastery of the noun charts is a little rusty—which it shouldn’t be at that point—but if it is a little rusty, then look for the definite article. The definite article usually goes with the noun. And usually the definite article will be compatible with the mastery of the noun ending chart. So you have two ways of finding the noun, or the pronoun or the adjective, because they follow the same kinds of endings. So you rummage around in the sentence and find your noun, find your pronouns, find your adjectives—those kinds of things, right? And then look for your verb. So you’re pulling these things down and you’re putting them together. And as you string them together you can then translate them; that’s the idea. Yes, Bob?

Bob Busted: Just a thought. It’s interesting that the German language is always has the verb endings at the end. In other words, you don’t know if the man kissed her or hit her. *(Laughter)* It’s all very interesting.

Jeff: You know, isn’t there a joke where in the second act of the play he looks at the other guy and says, “Do you want to leave now?” And the guy says, “I’m still waiting for the verb.” *(Laughter)* I think it was Gary who told us that. Yes, Ted?

Ted: It’s critical. We understand English by the order that appears in the sentence.

“More Genres: Letters”

Jeff: That’s right.

Ted: This is different from most languages. Almost every language is inflected.

Jeff: Yeah, that’s right.

Ted: It means there is a different ending if it’s a noun, or if it’s a direct object, or if it’s an indirect object. But the order is not as important. And in Anglo-Saxon that people would speak a thousand years ago, then it was highly inflected. But then we got invaded by the Normans, and we also had to deal with the Vikings. And that all simplified the language. So now we don’t have any gender in our language—praise God! (*Laughter*) And none of our words are inflected.

Jeff: You know, it all unravels for you in 1066, doesn’t it? (*Laughter*)

Ted: Everything went downhill from there. (*Laughter*) No, I’m just saying that English is very different. Russian is inflected, German is inflected, Greek is inflected, Latin is inflected. But English is one of the languages that is not.

Jeff: Right.

Don: So then, we’re not contagious.

Ted: That’s correct. (*Laughter*)

Bishop Rodgers: By putting a word first in a sentence there’s a certain tendency to emphasize that word.

Jeff: Yes, that’s right.

Bishop: If we just thought about this candidly, some of the reasons (*unclear*) is that they want to emphasize things.

Jeff: Yes. It’s not because they’re sloppy. It’s because there’s a versatility in the Greek language so that you can, like you said, emphasize something. And oftentimes that’s the way it’s written in the New Testament. You look for the emphasis at the beginning of the sentence. What is the author saying? What does he want us to catch?

Ron Baling: So how can you tell the difference between casual Greek and formal Greek?

Jeff: Between what?

Ron: How can you tell the difference between casual Greek and formal Greek?

Jeff: Casual and formal?

Ron: The first thing you mentioned was casual language.

Jeff: Oh, causal. Did I spell that wrong? It’s causal. I was going to say that there is classical and there’s *koine*, but not casual and formal. (*Laughter*) Okay, this whole Greek thing is a detour. I’m not sure how we got there. So let’s go on to looking at these letters and how we interpret them.

So when we look at a letter there are many things that we can do. But one of the things that we want to look for is causal language. For instance, the man died because of his wounds. That’s causal, right? Why did the man die? He died because. And so we’re looking for causal language when we look.

Everybody who has gone to the moon has eaten chicken. Good grief, chickens make you go to the moon! (*Laughter*) You know, it’s sort of like “the rooster crows in the morning,” right? And the sun comes up when the rooster crows. Well, if you can keep the rooster from crowing you can keep the sun from coming up, right? (*Laughter*) It’s that kind of thing.

“More Genres: Letters”

You have to be careful about causal language when you’re looking at the New Testament. But you are looking for causal language. And you’re looking for why this happens and why that happens, and so on. And when you look for that kind of language you want to look for words like *because* or *for* or *since* or *by* or *on account of*—small words that tell you a great deal, that actually help you when it comes to the interpretive process.

For instance, let’s take a couple of examples. Look at Philippians chapter 2; let’s just look at a couple of places. Philippians chapter 2, verses 12 and 13.

Now the interesting thing is that here we have something else. “Therefore” strikes us that this is a concluding statement. But we’ll talk about that in a little bit.

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” There’s the causal language. For, or because, or since.

Now each one of those things is going to be a different nuance. For instance, there’s going to be a Greek word that’s going to help you decide which one of those causal indicators to place in there when you translate. But some of these have some latitude. And what I want you to see right now is the versatility of causal language so that you can see it when you’re interpreting.

So here you have this statement where he says, *“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, because it is God who works in you.”* Now when you think about interpreting, and you look at this in terms of causal language, that opens up a great door for study.

Or how about James? Go to James chapter 4 and the latter part of verse 2 down to verse 3. *“You do not have.”* Why? *“Because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your own passions.”*

Now those are simple things, right? You read that verse and you’ve read it a hundred times. But the idea is, if you just stop and look at a verse and read it slowly and ask yourself what’s going on here, you’re opening the door of causal language, and you’re answering some questions. *“You do not have.”* Why don’t I have? Here’s the causal language. *“Because you do not ask.”* Okay; simple as that.

So these kinds of things, though they are simple, open up doors for understanding. Let’s face it: sometimes we just ride over this kind of stuff. And the simplest thing that provides a great deal of depth is just basically ignored because we already know that, and we just move on. And so we want to be careful to read slowly, to read patiently, to ask questions of the text, and to really dig deep.

How about this? How about *result language*? The man was wounded badly, so that he died. “So that” is resultant language. In other words we’re not looking at cause now; we’re looking at what is the result of his wounds. He was wounded so badly that he died, or so that he died.

And when you’re looking at resultant language you’re looking at words like that or so that, obviously as a result—therefore, accordingly, consequently, or so as.

Now remember what I said before. I said that “therefore” seems to be the conclusion of an argument. But it can be resultant, which is conclusive. But you can think of it not simply as that which ends the argument. But this is the action which results from the

“More Genres: Letters”

behavior; you can go in that direction. There are a number of things that you can think of when you begin to think about resultant language.

Let’s look at some other places. Go back to Philippians. Take a look at Philippians; look at chapter 1, verses 9 and 10. “*And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment, so that.*” In other words, “I want you to abound more and more in love and knowledge and all discernment.” Why? What’s the result Paul wants? “*So that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.*”

So here he’s telling you something—“this is what I want from you.” And then he’s telling you the result—why he wants this from you. What does he expect as a result of seeing that in your life? Again very simple, but again, when you read it and break it down, you’re helping yourself to understand the text and what the author is saying.

Or how about this one: 1:27? “*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.*” Why? Well, here’s our resultant language: “*So that, whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.*”

So “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel.” Why? Well, here’s why. Or look in 2:10. You can see that this stuff is all over the place. Let’s start in verse 9. “*For God has highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.*”

Now here’s something that’s really fascinating, right? This isn’t “I want your behavior to be such so that,” or “because I want to see this result.” What we see here is a theological truth. We see the theological truth that Christ’s name is exalted above every name for what purpose; for what result? So that every knee shall bow; that’s the idea. So it doesn’t have to be “I just want you to do this because I want to see this.” This can also be that God did this, and this is the response that ought to be seen as the result of that.

And so look for resultant language when you look at the letters of the New Testament. So you’re looking for causal language, you’re looking for resultant language, you’re looking for conditional statements.

Conditional statements: If he was wounded, then he would have gone to the ER. Okay, so there’s your if-then. If he was wounded, then he would have gone to the ER. So when you have these conditional statements you’re looking for words like if/then. You’re also looking for except or unless—those kinds of words.

How about a few examples of those words? For instance in Romans chapter 8 and verse 9, here we find that “*the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you may—*” Sorry; what’s that?

Don: That’s 2 Corinthians 8:9.

Jeff: Oh, I’m in 2 Corinthians. Oh man, you are good! Wow, Don!

Don: People were turning and they weren’t going to find—

Jeff: Oh man!

Ted: That was good.

Jeff: Wait a minute, wait a minute. (*Laughter*) The blind guy who can’t see the text in front of him says this out of memory! Wow, Don; that was super impressive! (*Laughter*) I will go to the grave thinking about this. (*Laughter*) Oh, man! Let’s try romans. And if I’m not in Romans Don will let me know. (*Laughter*)

“More Genres: Letters”

Ted: “So that every tongue may be stopped.”

Jeff: Right. Romans 8:9: “*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him.*”

This is kind of an interesting one because the “if” comes later. “*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*” So you actually have them in the same verse. If the Spirit of God dwells in you, then you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit.

So Paul sometimes does this, where he reverses the if and the then statement. But he’s doing the same thing; he’s putting the then statement first and then the if statement. But that’s it, and sometimes you have to look for that in Paul.

How about 2 Corinthians 5:17? And here’s a more traditional one. “*Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*” You can insert the “then.” If you’re in Christ, then you’re a new creation. Okay, so those kinds of conditional statements.

How about *means* statements? By helicopter the wounded are brought to the ER. We’re looking for by what means this is being accomplished. And when you look for means statements you look for words like by and with, and by means of, of course, and through and in. So those kinds of words indicate this, and you can look at some examples.

1 Corinthians 10:30, for instance: “*If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that?*” Am I in the right one, Don?

Don: Yes.

Jeff: Yes. Okay; I’m just checking. (*Laughter*)

Ted: It’s like talking to God.

Don: Oh, no!

Brave Men: Oh!!

Ted: It’s like talking to Paul!

Jeff: “*If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?*” And then Ephesians 2:8 and 9: “*For by grace you have been saved through faith,*”—there are the means—“*and this is not of your own doing,*” and so on. So means statements.

Now when you think about letters, what are some questions that you might ask? Well, I think one of the things that you might ask yourself when you’re looking at letters is this: what’s being said? In other words, here we’re asking what’s the raw material that’s being communicated here? Not what does it mean to me?—remember, that’s significance. But when we look at the letter what is the letter saying, right? So what’s being said?

How is it being said? And this is always the dangerous thing. I know you can’t get around this. You can’t get around the emotive aspect, reading the New Testament with passion. Right? Especially when you’re standing up there and you’re a minister or you’re a teacher, you’re reading the New Testament to people. One of the things that’s hard is to divorce yourself from the emotion that goes into reading. And when you read with emotion you interpret. You are helping people to understand the letter in a certain way.

For instance, let’s say this. Let’s forget the letter, but let’s say something really basic, like Genesis chapter 3. Remember when God tells Adam not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, and Adam does? Of course you remember that. Then God comes

“More Genres: Letters”

searching for Adam and says, “Adam, where are you?” (*Shouting*) Or is it “Adam, where are you?” (*Calm*) You can read that inflected in so many different ways. But you are interpreting to people as you read it.

And so this is the tough thing. You can’t divorce yourself from emotion. You’re a unitary dispositional complex. You function with a mind and a will and emotions and a body, and so on. Look, I can’t talk to you right now; look at me, I’m emotional!

Ted: Right.

Jeff: Right; I can’t do it apart from emotion. So emotion is part of everything that we do. And that’s why when you’re reading the Scriptures to people you have to be at least fully aware that the way you’re reading it communicates.

Now when you read it and study it you’re not reading the Scriptures to people. You’re just studying; you’re at your table. So how is it that you determine what’s being said? One of the ways that you might determine what’s being said is what I said to you earlier on. What if you’re reading a letter like Galatians, and you don’t find any sort of warm welcome? There’s just a jumping into it. “You foolish Galatians!” Well, there’s a pretty good idea that you can read that with some level of passion that’s going into this, right? There are indicators within the written text that will help you out with that sort of thing.

But one of the things that you have to keep in mind is that that’s an open can of worms that you’ve got to keep in mind. So how is it being said?

Then you need to outline the argument. When you’re looking at a letter, not only—Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Matt Kail: Well, I hope that I’m catching this at the right time.

Jeff: Yes; go ahead.

Matt: Because I’ve heard the idea before that reading the text should be flat and non-emotional, and I think that’s what I’m hearing you say.

Jeff: Well I don’t think that’s possible. Here’s what I’d advocate. What I would advocate is that you read the text in the way that you’ve come to understand the text as you’ve studied the text. So after having studied it, before you get up into the pulpit, it might be a good idea to practice reading it so that you’re reading it in such a way that it will reflect your own interpretation of it.

Matt: And then the other thought that occurs to me is that one of my favorite examples of that is where Nathan confronts David. He says, “Who did this?” I was talking to my wife about it. I said, “Sharon, he says, ‘Thou art the man!’” (*Shouting*)

Jeff: Yeah, right.

Matt: And she said, “No, no. He’s the king; Nathan doesn’t have to over-emphasize. He said, ‘Thou art the man.’” (*Gently*) And so when I preach that passage I’ll read “Thou art the man!” because that’s how I take it. And then later as I unfold it I’ll say, “But here’s another way, another possibility of interpreting.

Jeff: Yeah.

Matt: Okay, thanks.

Jeff: Yes, and that’s the thing, right? You’re doing that intentionally. You’re reading it in one way so that you can put something into the mind of your hearers. But when you go back to help them to understand it you’re saying, “Now I read it this way, but.” Right?

Matt: Mm-hmm.

“More Genres: Letters”

Jeff: You don’t think about how involved the interpretive process is. But every little thing really matters. Great point.

Sig: Jeff, I’ve heard some Presbyterian ministers—

Ted: Uh-oh! *(Laughter)*

Sig: They will chant either a Psalm or a proverb like it doesn’t have emotion. At least when I heard them chant, I thought—

Brave Man: Do Presbyterians typically chant?

Sig: Well, I think it was a Presbyterian church where they did it.

Ted: Oh, they’re on the slope.

Sig: They’re on the list. *(Laughter)* Does chanting fit in there in any way, in terms of--

Jeff: I want you to know that Ted is cheering him on. *(Laughter)* What’s that?

Sig: Does chanting fit in there to express a non-emotion when you’re reading Scripture? It’s almost like singing, but--

Jeff: Yeah. I don’t know. I used to know why the Gregorian chants were developed back in the Middle Ages, but I don’t remember now.

Ted: Bishop Rodgers could speak to that.

David Miller: He can? *(Laughter)*

Ted: In Anglicanism the congregation sings the Psalms. When Archbishop Thomas Cranmer introduced the new prayer book he put the Psalms in a language that was called plain song that everybody could sing and would not require a trained choir, because he was very keen on the congregation singing the Scriptures.

Jeff: That’s the Presbyterian influence. *(Laughter)*

Ted: You need to insist on it as a matter of salvation. *(Laughter)*

Jeff: In the Puritan Bay colony what they used to do is line out the Psalms. So the presenter would sing a line and then the people would sing it, which was apparently murder—just horrible.

Ted: Really!

Jeff: Well, that’s what I’ve gathered, especially if you have a singer like myself.

Ted: No, you’re probably a good singer.

Jeff: Oh, yeah! Anyway, let’s move along. *(Laughter)*

Bob: Please.

Jeff: Okay, Bob.

Sig: Bob has a great voice.

Jeff: Oh, he does. He doesn’t even need that microphone. Go ahead, Bob.

Bob: You know, while I’m thinking about it, you go through all these questions and all these different things.

Jeff: Yeah.

Bob: I’m wondering in my mind as we think about all of the different versions of the Bible--the ones that have been changed from the King James Version to—

Jeff: Right.

Bob: I’m wondering if the true meaning of the author has been modified and substantially changed because of the way these words are being rearranged as we think of the new translations.

Jeff: You know, that’s a great question, Bob. And I’m going to go out on a limb and take ten minutes to answer that question. *(Laughter)* And we’ll see how this goes. I’m not

“More Genres: Letters”

sure this will help you, but this is a good way to get you to come back. If you get all riled up in the last ten minutes you’ll say, “I’ve got to come back and fix that guy!” (*Laughter*) That’s what I like; I’m good with that. I’ve heard and I realize that contrast is good for Sig, so I’m going to—

Sig: the old guys.

Jeff: The older guys, not Sig; the older guys, okay. So let’s put Paul up here, okay? And Paul writes a letter, and let’s say it’s the letter to the Romans, although we can put any Pauline letter up here that we wanted, okay? And this is called the *autograph*. This is the letter that Paul wrote, okay?

Now here’s the Bible we have today. And the Bible we have today is an attempt to get us back to the autograph. Now here is where we have to make a distinction. We’re not trying to get back to the codex or the book or the actual papyrus on which he wrote, because we say that’s been lost. Papyrus may last 600 years, but it’s likely not going to last 2,000 years. And so the papyrus on which he wrote is not what we’re attempting to recover. What we’re attempting to recover is the text—what he actually wrote on that original papyrus. So what we’re looking for is the text that Paul wrote. Is that clear to everybody?

Ted: Sure.

Jeff: All right.

Ted: As close as we can get to it.

Jeff: Yes. Now Paul writes this letter, okay? And what happens is, if you can think of it like this, Paul writes the letter to the Romans. And Billy Bob comes to Rome, and he’s from Philippi. And he discovers that there’s a letter that Paul wrote to the Romans! And he says, “Hey, can I copy that?” And they say, “Absolutely!”

So Billy Bob takes his letter, his copy back to Philippi. And then somebody from Ephesus comes and takes his copy back. And then somebody from Corinth comes and takes their letter back—all copied from the original letter.

Now what happens is, let’s say Billy Bob has a little error in his letter, because Billy Bob is a mechanic and he’s not a scribe; he’s not used to this. He’s done an admirable job, but he hasn’t done a great job. And so there’s a little error in Billy Bob’s copy, okay?

And let’s say there’s another error in the copy that the one from Ephesus copied. But it’s not the same one as Billy Bob’s. And let’s say there’s another one in the letter to Corinth. But it’s not the one that’s in the letter from Ephesus or Billy Bob’s letter.

So what do you do at the end of this process, when you collect all of these different texts that have been copies of this original letter? You use these different texts to correct one another.

Let me give you an example; it’s as simple as this. Let’s say that a teacher gets a letter from the President of the United States. Now this is going to be dated. This example is dated, because this is something that a teacher would have done in 1975, right? She gets a letter from the President. And she says, “Look, kids; I have a letter from the President! So what we’re going to do now is, I’m going to have you guys copy it.”

And so she sets it on an overhead, and it projects onto the screen. And she says, “Now you copy it exactly the way you see it.” And so the class turns into a scriptorium, right? The class basically becomes a whole bunch of scribes copying one letter.

“More Genres: Letters”

Now let’s say they all copy it. And she collects them, corrects their errors and gives it back to them. Now let’s say that the next year she’s going to do this exercise. But she has lost the letter of the President. So what does she do? All the kids are in class. For the next year they’re all, say, in fourth grade. And she goes to the fourth grade class and she says, “Kids, kids! Those of you who had me, who copied the President’s letter, can you go home and get it and bring it back to me?”

And so out of say thirty kids, five have moved and ten have retained the letter. And they bring the letter back to her. And she does her best to reconstruct the letter, the original letter, from those ten. Is everybody following me? Does this make sense?

Brave Man: Is that metric or English? (*Laughter*)

Jeff: Thank you, Ted. (*Laughter*) But this is the way that we recover the autographic text of the New Testament, right?

Now it’s a little more complicated than that. And I’ll go a little further if we’re okay at this point. Are you okay at this point?

Jim Hamilton: Go for it.

Jeff: Okay. Now what has happened is that basically three different families of texts have grown up. You have what’s called the Byzantine family, and then you have the Alexandrian family, and then you have what’s called the Western family. Okay?

Now these three families of texts are like taking Ephesians, Corinth and Philippi, and enlarging them. So we have mostly Byzantine texts, Alexandrian texts and Western texts.

Now let me describe each of these families. The Byzantine text family is the largest family, and it’s the most smoothed out. In other words, the Byzantine family looks like copyists as they’ve gone along and tried to compare these texts and smooth out the reading of the Byzantine family.

Now that doesn’t mean that there aren’t differences within the Byzantine text family; there are many, many, many differences. But this is the smoothest family as you read it.

The Alexandrian text family is from scribes in Alexandria. Alexandria was very scholarly; it had the largest library in the ancient world with scriptoriums; they were very scholarly. When you find an Alexandrian text it’s a corrected text. For example, when you look at Sinaiticus, which is an Alexandrian text, you see where the scribes got it. As they retained other copies of texts they would correct their major texts with copies as they adjusted. I mean, they were just looking to get back to the autographic text by the use of textual criticism, by collecting other manuscripts.

The Western text is like the wild, wild West. Okay, so let me give you a for instance here. Let me say this. The book of Acts in the Western tradition is 10% longer than these other families—10% longer.

Don: Wow!

Jeff: Why is that? It’s because, for instance, when a scribe would write sometimes he would write a note in the margin. And so a Western scribe would take that text in the margin and just put it in the text. Instead of it being just a textual note like in a study Bible, he would just actually put it in the text. And so, for instance, the book of Acts grew 10% larger.

So for instance, have you ever noticed that lots of times in your footnotes, when Paul was teaching in Ephesus, it says that he taught there in the heat of the day, between the

“More Genres: Letters”

hours of noon and three? Remember that? Is that not ringing a bell? Well that comes from the Western text. That’s one of those side margin things that gets put in the text.

Why do we know that? Because when we compare the Byzantine and the Alexandrian texts with it, that’s a side margin thing, not a text thing. So the Western text is kind of a wild, wild translation. Yes, Don?

Don: Is that the text of the King James?

Jeff: No. Let me wrap this up by saying this right now. When you think of the King James Bible, the King James Bible basically takes six texts from the thousands of Byzantine texts. The King James is based on six texts from this family. Now actually it’s based on three texts, because there are basically three texts and then there are three other texts. One is a source text and the other two are copies of it. So basically you have four different texts in all, and two or three of them are really good.

Let me tell you something. When it comes to the King James Bible, the textual evidence for the King James Bible is about four texts. Let me tell you something else. A lot of people don’t know this, but there are a lot of problems with the King James Bible.

For instance, take for example the last six verses of the book of Revelation.

Transcriber’s Note: Revelation 22:16-21, NKJV. *“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star.”*

“And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming quickly.’ Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”

Jeff: Erasmus was the guy who took these six and put them together. A lot of people don’t know that the last six verses of Revelation weren’t in any texts he had upon hand. So what he did was, he took the Latin Vulgate and he translated from the Latin back into the Greek. And so the last six verses in your King James Bible are Erasmus’ translation of the Latin back into the Greek. They are not from any Greek texts that can be traced back to the apostles. Or 1 John 5:7.

Transcriber’s Note: 1 John 5:7, NKJV. *“For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.”*

Jeff: If you look in your notes, one of the things that you find is that it will say, “Not in the earliest manuscripts.” I mean, there’s a great story behind that. The great story is that Erasmus didn’t put it in his first edition. And so he had some monks come in and say to him, “look, you missed a verse.”

And he said, “If you can produce a text for me I’ll put it in.” So they came back to him and they produced a text which we date now to be about the time of Erasmus.

Brave Man: Does everyone know what that verse is?

Jeff: Yes; 1 John 5:7.

Ted: Say what it is.

“More Genres: Letters”

Don: “The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit bear witness, and these three are one.”

Jeff: Yeah. I know; it’s amazing! Anyway, this is the King James. Now there is what is called “the majority text.” And there are Bibles based on the majority text, just the Byzantine text.

But what about your ESV and your NIV and your New American Standard? They are based on all three textual traditions, but mainly they are based on the Alexandrian. And they use the Byzantine and they use the Western, but they’re mainly Alexandrian. I don’t know of any translation that we use today that uses the Western tradition as its sole source of families. The Western tradition is used, but it’s often used as a secondary text family and not a primary text family.

Don: What about the New King James?

Jeff: The New King James is based primarily on these six texts, but it’s one of the most generous. If you look at the side notes they will often reference Alexandrian and Western texts in their side margins. But the text itself is what’s called the *textus receptus*—the TR, which is just these texts here—the received text.

Ted: The received text.

Jeff: So Bob, in other words, I would say to you, how do we know things haven’t been changed? Well, the more text we have, the greater opportunity we have to get back to the actual text—the autographic texts. The less texts you have, the smaller opportunity you have. We have at this point over 5,000 texts of the New Testament—fragments or in whole. And we have texts that date all the way back to the second century.

Ted: The second century; 120.

Jeff: Yes.

Bob: Well, in one sense I’m sorry I asked this question. (*Laughter*) But I’d like to conclude with one question.

Jeff: Yes.

Bob: In the scholarly vote, which particular version of the Bible do you think they would recommend we should buy?

Jeff: Well, I’ll tell you what. That’s a great question, but it leads to another answer. (*Laughter*) Let me just say this really quick. When you look at—

Mike Davis: Jeff has one on sale. (*Laughter*)

Jeff: When you look at translations, you’re looking at moving from dynamic to formal equivalence. In other words, how formal or how dynamic—how loose—do you want your translation to be? If you want a loose translation—not a word for word but a thought for thought, an idea for an idea—than you move into the dynamic. And the dynamic would be, for instance, Philips Translation. Now the Philips Translation is way, far dynamic. It’s really kind of a loose thing But the New Living Translation would be an example of a far side dynamic.

Matt: What about “The Message?”

Jeff: “The Message” would be way over there. Formal would be like the King James. The New King James would be actually formal; the New American Standard would be formal.

Versions that would be more in between but to the formal side, which would try to go word for word but not necessarily always be able to do it, and so go thought for thought,

“More Genres: Letters”

would be like the ESV, the NIV—those kinds of texts. That would be more on this side of the spectrum.

So it depends on what you want, Bob.

This is why I say that when you study the Bible, if you don't know Greek, that what you ought to do is that you ought to have five versions—one down here—maybe a J. B. Phillips—one up here—maybe a New American Standard—and maybe a couple in the middle. And that way, knowing what you have, you can say, “Well, this is kind of as close as I'm going to get to the original. But this gives me a sense of the text that this (other one) doesn't give me. But the further you go this way—(dynamic)—the more interpretive you get.

Ted: Yeah.

Jeff: And that's what you have to keep in mind. The further you move away from an attempt to be literal, the more you get into interpretation.

Brave Man: So I had a thought as a response to Bob's question. It's that any one of the formal Bibles—maybe the ESV—has study notes that are more interpretive than dynamic.

Jeff: That's definitely right. For instance, take your New American Standard which is going to be more formal. And you got your study notes from, say, John MacArthur, right? You're going to have that kind of dynamic. You're going to kind of reach across the spectrum.

Ted: It is just a much more complex issue than most people think.

Jeff: Yeah.

Ted: And when people say, as you said, that we have 5,000 manuscripts, and that's why it's the most documented holy book in the world, I'm not too sure that's altogether persuasive, because I would have to ask the question. How old are those manuscripts?

Jeff: Sure.

Ted: I mean, of the five thousand, how many date 2- or 300 closest to the time of the apostles?

Jeff: Yes. So for instance, with Byzantine texts you're not going to have any before the 400s.

Ted: Yeah. We're talking 400 years after the time of the apostles.

Jeff: Yes, the late 400s. This is the earliest Byzantine text you can have.

Ted: So when you say we have lots and lots of manuscripts, it doesn't mean anything.

Jeff: No, that's right.

Ted: I'm looking for the earliest stuff.

Jeff: Yeah. And not only are we talking manuscripts, but you're talking about lectionaries and letters and books that have quotes from Scripture in them. All of this stuff is evidence.

Ted: Right.

Jeff: I think the bishop has something.

Bishop: I just point back to the Reformation(*Unclear*) The central message of Scripture is clear enough.

Jeff: Right; absolutely. That's a great reminder, Bishop. Let me end with this. Bart Ehrman, who is a great critic of the New Testament text today, has written all kinds of books—*Misquoting Jesus*, and all kinds of texts attacking the New Testament. This is

“More Genres: Letters”

actually in the appendix of *Misquoting Jesus*. I can't believe they put this in there, because it actually undermines his entire book. But anyway, they ask him. They say, “Is there anything in the text of Scripture, or anything in the copies that undermines the message and the doctrine of the New Testament text?”

Ted: No.

Jeff: And he says no. There is no textual proof that undermines any doctrine that we have in the Scriptures. And this is the greatest critic of the New Testament that's alive today! And he says that.

And in fact this is actually really great.. He was asked by another scholar. He said, “Do you think that we have the autographic text of the New Testament?” Now here's the greatest critic of the New Testament talking. This is what he said. He said, “I think there's one place in Luke where there's a question. But other than that I think we have the text of the New Testament.”

I'm like really? Shut up, then! You know what I mean? (*Laughter*)

Rich Clark: Jeff, in your own professional Greek opinion, do you think Paul wrote Hebrews?

Jeff: Oh yeah, listen to you! (*Laughter*)

Rich: Or was it my man, Apollos?

Jeff: What's that?

Rich: If it was it my man, Apollos? (*Laughter*)

Jeff: Man, you are a braver man than I am to take an opinion on that. I don't know; I don't have a hard opinion.

Brave Man: You know, after you've said all of this,--

Jeff: Yeah?

Brave Man: All I can say is, if the King James was good enough for Paul, it's good enough for me. (*Laughter*)

Jeff: I just want to tell you this. We were once door-to-door evangelizing. I apologize for all my Baptist brothers. But we went to this one guy, and this guy was a hard-core Fundamental Baptist. And at the time he found out that we used the ESV, or something like that. And he was coming down really hard on us.

And I said, “Let me ask you a question. If you went to a foreign country, and you could only take with you the Greek or the King James to translate into that foreign language, what would you take?”

And he said, “Well I'd take the King James. Why would I take anything else?” And I'm like, okay; all right; that says it all to me.

Ted: That's what Baptists talk like, too. (*Laughter*)

Jeff: The ironic thing was that we were in an urban setting. He talked like he was from where I was from. That's funny. Anyway, Don, you're it; you're the last guy.

Don: Yes. Isn't it interesting also, Jeff, that whether we're talking about the epistles or other parts, it's important that the problem with English is that we have one word that may be communicated in several words with the Greek—like justify, for example.

Sig: Or propitiation.

Don: Or love.

Jeff: Yeah, but think about it, Don. Think about the word *run*. I think I mentioned this earlier. The word *run* has 75 meanings to it in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. So there is

“More Genres: Letters”

latitude in meaning in every language for vocabulary. And that’s true when it comes to Greek as well.

That’s why when you think about translation we talk about literal translation. Well that’s really tough, because what we’re trying to do is, for instance, here is the root word in Greek for *work*. And we’re trying to approximate that in our English translations. So in other words there are some meanings that are here. And there are some meanings that are here that overlap. But there may be meanings in this part of the circle that don’t overlap with these meanings in this part of the circle. So what we’re trying to do is, we’re trying to get as close as we can to word meanings, both in the ancient and in the present world. So does that make sense? Probably not. Yeah? Okay. All right; let’s pray and adjourn.

Father, thank You for this day and for the blessing of being able to be in Your word and to think about how we might interpret it. Lord, we ask that You will continue to bless us and strengthen us by Your grace as we do so, knowing that we don’t do it alone. But Your Spirit who is at work in us is indeed at work in us. And so we pray that Your blessing would be upon us, not simply for an academic exercise, but that we might be living vessels, containers of Your word, and that it might spill out of our lives into the lives of others around us, that we might minister to them, that we might speak a seasonable word into their lives which will minister to them in a way that they have need, even today. And so we ask it in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen. (*Applause*)