Another fallacy or misstep in doing word studies, the fourth one, is sort of the opposite of number one. The first one we discussed was what is often known as the etymological or root fallacy where the origins or the history of the word is given too much weight in determining what a word means at a certain time. The opposite is to go the other direction in what is often called “the anachronism” that is reading a Greek or Hebrew word in light of a later meaning. Now once again, its, this is not to say that understanding modern Greek and modern Hebrew meanings don’t help at all or have no influence at all, on what, or might not shed some light on what a word might have meant in its original context, but again to assume that a later meaning of the Greek or Hebrew word, is necessarily what it meant in its original context is certainly a fallacy. Again, what is important is what that word meant, given time and history for our purposes, in biblical Hebrew, or first century usage Greek.

For the average student though, perhaps more difficult or what they might more prone to do that do not have access to the original languages is to perhaps read Hebrew and English, the meaning of Hebrew and Greek words in light of later English translations for example. So we may translate Greek and Hebrew words and think necessarily that the way we have translated it, the meaning of that word in our modern day English, can be read back anachronistically into the ancient text. Or, furthermore, the fact that many of our modern day English words are derived fromsemantic or even Greek words such as “anthropology,” comes from, is the base from the Greek word anthropos. We talk about pneumatic tools that are run by air. It is from the Greek word pneuma, which means “wind” or “air” or “spirit.” So, many of our words in English are derived from ancient roots in Greek or sometimes other languages.

Sometimes the danger is not only to read ancient words in terms of the English words we’ve translated with, but also to interpret a word into Greek, in terms of our
modern day derivations of those words. For example, one easy example again that I’ve culled from a couple of other sources that have recognized this and not only read about, but have also heard this committed in pulpits, is one of the most well known, as its actually quite silly example from 2 Corinthians. Paul’s discussion of and his instructions to the Corinthians regarding their giving is in chapter 8. Chapter 8, and verse 9, I think is the one I want. It is the text where Paul tells the Corinthians and instructs them to give “because God loves a cheerful giver.” Perhaps some of you have heard this, the word “cheerful” is the Greek word, hilarion, from which we get the English word “hilarious.” I’ve seen others point to this, but I’ve heard examples of preachers who say therefore what God really wants is a hilarious giver to the extent that we laugh or are ecstatic. The problem is that, that’s reading the Greek word hilarion, in achronistically in light of our English word hilarious, which now means something very different from how Paul was using the term.

So beware of reading later meanings of words back into the original Greek and Hebrew word meanings. And especially for most of us English speakers, especially if you don’t know Greek or Hebrew the danger of reading the Greek or Hebrew text in light, or Hebrew word in light of the English word we use to translate it thinking that what the word means in English is what it would have meant in Greek. Or, when, certain English words are derivatives of earlier words in thinking that English words are our words again, approximates what it means, in what the Hebrew word meant in its original context.

I heard he had given you an example of a student, in a class I took, that misunderstood or could not understand why Paul would use the word “hope” or the word we translate “hope.” Why we would call our salvation, and especially our future salvation, a hope. He could not understand that, based primarily on what the student was doing was confusing the Greek word that we translate “hope” with what we usually mean by hope when we use it English. Usually we use the word hope as something that we wish will happen but we aren’t certain whether it will or not. Whereas the Greek word that is usually translated hope, at least in Pauline texts, frequently refers to something that is certainty that one can stake one’s life upon. So it’s kind of the opposite of number 1
which is reading earlier meanings into the Greek or Hebrew texts. The opposite is reading the later meanings back into the text, again the meaning of the word, in its context, at that point in time, must be terminative.

**Reinventing the Wheel**

A fifth fallacy, or at least a fifth thing to avoid, is what I call “not reinventing the wheel.” That is to realize that much hard work has been done in lexical analysis. That does not mean that there is not still a lot of work to be done, there is. We’re uncovering new material or learning new methodologies and new ways of studying words, so there is much to be done and certainly it would be wrong to conclude that the final word has been said. Yet, at the same time, when much work has already been done and conclusions are fairly firm, I am a big one of not expending energy by doing something that has already been done. I’d rather use my energies on other areas that haven’t been done. So, just be aware of not reinventing the wheel and simply rehashing and reproducing work that has been already been completed.

**Don’t be Obsessed with Word Level**

Finally, number six, don’t become obsessed with words. That is, as we have already said, words combine to make clauses and clauses combine to make sentences, and sentences combine to make paragraphs, and paragraphs combine into entire discourses. So don’t become so obsessed with words but to realize that words are not the ultimate bearer of meaning or carriers of meaning. So, don’t focus on words to the detriment of other methods.

**Example Word Study from Galatians 5: Flesh**

Now having discussed briefly issues that are related to how we understand words, what they are and what they do, and understanding common methodologies for approaching them and some of the fallacies to avoid, let me give you just one example of how that might work from Galatians chapter 5, the well-known flesh versus spirit text, where Paul contrast the deeds of the flesh and the fruits of the spirit. I want to focus in on that word “flesh” in Galatians chapter 5, which is the Greek work *sarx*. But the word *sarx*, English translators in Galatians 5 frequently translates it with the English word
“flesh.” But, this word could be chosen for a couple of reasons. Again, the first step is to choose the word. I’ve chosen this word for a couple of reasons. Number one, it appears to play a significant role in this context in comparison to the word “spirit.” But also, English translations differ in the way they translate it. Some English translations use the single word equivalent in English, “flesh,” but other translations such as the original NIV translate it as “sin nature.” Also, there is a possibility of misunderstanding this term. If I translate it with the word “flesh” in English, should that lead me to the conclusion that Paul is talking about the physical flesh or the physical body or somehow complicit in sin or the body itself is sinful or evil? So the word “flesh” here, in Galatians 5, would seem to provide a fruitful term for study.

Second, as far as the field of meaning, what could this term possibly mean? How is it used in particular in the New Testament and in first century Greek? If you consult a few of the tools I mentioned earlier and other New Testament lexical type tools, you’ll see that the word can have a fairly broad range of meaning and different meanings and functions. For example, the word “flesh” as it does in English can refer to the physical flesh to the fleshly part of the body that covers the bones or it could be used in reference to the entire body. Paul, a couple of places, uses an idiom, such as “flesh and blood,” referring to the entire physical being, the entire body, and one’s physical existence. So it could refer to the physical body, physical existence. It’s used in a couple of places when Paul refers to “my own flesh,” relating to his ancestors and his relations, physical relations.

But it also could be used, a fourth possibility, is sometimes you see it used as humanity in oppositional rebellion against God. Or humanity as susceptible to sin as opposed to God, which is more of a spiritual or metaphorical usage of a term that is usually used to refer to physical flesh. Now, obviously, the first thing to note is that it cannot mean all of these. That is, when Paul uses the word “flesh” in Galatians 5, or sarx the word we translate “flesh,” it does not means all of these at the same time. So, the context most likely will disambiguate the meaning, that is to point to one of its meanings as the appropriate one in this context.
Notice also the contrast with “the spirit.” This would suggest that Paul is not, primarily, especially if spirit means Holy Spirit, the contrast is not primarily between physical versus spiritual. But that Paul probably had something else in mind. In other words, he is not against the physical flesh. He is not anti-flesh or against the physical body and sees the physical body as somehow evil or sinful in it of itself. Instead, it is better to understand… Well, let me go back to another example then. The original NIV translated it as “sin nature.” Interestingly, the new, the 2011 version NIV has reverted back to the single word “flesh.” But the original NIV translated *sarb* in Galatians 5 not everywhere, but in Galatians 5 in contrast with Holy Spirit, walking in the spirit, translated “flesh” as “sin nature.” However, to many, this may suggest that sin nature as some antithetical part of my being or some separate impulse or some separate part of me that produces sin or something like that. Perhaps because of potential misunderstanding of “sin nature,” only were unsatisfied with that definition and the 2011 version of the NIV has switched to use the word “flesh.”

I think a better understanding of the word when you look at it in its context and relying on some other tools for help, is that here the term “flesh,” as we translate in English, refers to my entire self, my entire physical, spiritual makeup, my entire self as weak and susceptible as sin. It refers to my entire self as under the influence of this present evil age and relying on the resources of the present age. So to rely on the flesh, then, in this sense, to rely in the flesh, then who I am, my entire physical and spiritual being as belonging to and under the influence and relying solely on the resources of the present evil age. My entire self is susceptible and weak and susceptible to sin, that is what produces the vices listed in Galatians 5. So probably, something along that line is what Paul is asking the readers to avoid when he says the deeds of the flesh are these. That is, when I rely on the resources of the present evil age, when I rely on myself as part of this present age and susceptible to sin, and weakened toward sin, inevitably I will produce the deeds of the flesh. However, he asks them to walk in the spirit in the new covenant of the Holy Spirit and to produce the fruits of the spirit.
So, words studies are important. It’s important to understand the meaning of key words and key lexical features in the biblical text, while keeping in mind the different dangers and fallacies that could be committed, and to avoid them. Again, ultimately to realize that words are not the ultimate bearer and carrier of meanings but that again words combine to make clauses and clauses combined into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs come together to produce an entire discourse. So if one only does word studies, you’ve only dealt with part of how a text communicates meaning.

**Grammar and Context**

Which then leads us to the next thing to consider, in interpretation and hermeneutics, and that is the issue of grammar and context. I want to make a series of observations related to how we analyze the grammar of a text and how do we analyze the broader context. Again, I am basically directing this to those who do not know Hebrew and Greek, those who are Greek-less or Hebrew-less. Obviously, if you know Greek and Hebrew, you have access to a lot more resources and are able to go into a lot more depth than I will discuss here.

But, beyond just understanding the meaning of words, there is a need to understand then how words are put together to form phrases and clauses and sentences and how those are put together to form paragraphs, and how paragraphs then relate to each other and are put together to form entire books or documents or discourses. What I want to do is to focus for a moment on grammatical analysis and make some observations, both in how you might employ grammar in a limited way in trying to understand the text, especially with only access to an English translation but also how you can evaluate other tools that do discuss the grammar of text.

First of all, with when it comes to grammatical analysis, that is, I am using the word grammar, fairly loosely but looking at how words are combined into sentences and how sentences and clauses get combined. We want to look at the grammar of passage and how it works. Here probably a more formal equivalent translation is of help. Even a formal equivalent, that is a literal translation, will not capture completely and perfectly the grammar of the Hebrew and Greek text but it will hopefully bring you closer to it than
other types, especially more dynamic equivalent types. If one wants to do a grammatical study, it would help to have at least one or more formal equivalent or literal translations at one’s disposal, especially if you don’t know Hebrew or Greek. Also, commentaries can be of great help in alerting you to grammatical issues and how those might be significant for interpretation.

**Grammatical Guidelines**

Let me just give you a couple of guidelines, and again due to my area of interest and focus, I will focus on the Greek language and grammar and how that may influence the way one interprets the text, especially by means of evaluating tools that might make grammatical interpretations.

**Greek Verbs: Aspect versus Tense Approaches**

One important thing to recognize is the difference at least in both Hebrew and Greek between the tense systems of those languages. One must also include the differences with the language of modern day spoken English, the translations of the Greek and Hebrew text. Especially with the New Testament Greek, what you will find is that the English verb system is primarily, though not exclusively, but primarily temporarily oriented. That is when we think of tense, we think of the English verbs indicating past, present and future. With both Hebrew, perhaps, and especially Greek, the time of the action, past, present and future, was not necessarily indicated by the tenses themselves but with the other things in the context.

Especially with the Greek tenses system, what was indicated is what scholars called aspect, or how the author chose to look at the action, how the author chose to view the action, irrespective of when the action took place or even how objectively it actually occurs. The Greek tenses simply tell us how the authors chooses to view it, how did the author choose to look at this action.

**Explanation of Greek Aspect**

I just want to make a few comments on two of the main tense in Greek. One of them is what is called the aorist tense. You’ll see commentaries and other works describe the aorist tense, and what is known as the present tense. The genius of these two tenses
has often been described with an analogy that, again this is not new to me, I am borrowing it from a couple of others, but one could compare aspect in Greek tenses. That is how the author wants to look at the action with the analogy of a parade. That is, if I am in a blimp or a helicopter, and let’s say there is a parade that takes place, I’ll use another American example, if there is a parade that takes place on July 4th to celebrate Independence Day, and that parade begins at nine o’clock and ends at 12 o’clock. I want to make it clear, I am referring to the same parade with what I am about to say. If I am a news correspondent flying above the parade in the helicopter, I see the parade in its entirety. I don’t see it necessarily as it develops and unfolds. I am not interested in how long it took or how it develops or its different parts. I just see the whole the things, I see the parade in its entirely.

However, taking the same parade, if I am an observer on the street corner, I can see the same parade from a completely different perspective, from a completely different aspect. I look at it as it develops and unfolds. I can stand right on the street corner and see the different bands and the different floats moving before. Again, it is the same parade but whether I am looking at it as a whole from a helicopter or whether I’m an observer on the street corner seeing it develop and unfold, seeing its details, those are simply different ways of looking at the exact same parade.

**Aorist in Greek**

The same is true with New Testament Greek. The aorist tense could look at the action as the whole as if the author stands back and looks at the events, whether it was a real brief event, whether it happened instantaneously, whether it was repeated, whether it took place over a long period of time. The aorist tense would be like if the author stands back and looks at the action as a whole. The present tense would be as if the author decides to enter the action and see it internally as it develops and unfolds in front of him. That would be similar to the present tense. Again, whether the action was short or long or repeated, that can only be determined by the context. All the present tense said was the author looked at the action from its details and how it developed and unfolded as oppose to the aorist tense that just said “there it is” and looked at it in its entirety.
Often, the aorist tense in Greek is considered the default tense. That is again, if you turned on your computer and you start to type in your word processing program, there is often a default size of font, often 12, unless you want to click a different size font, a 8 or a 10 or something like that. Again your computer will have a default printer. That is the printer it automatically chooses. You don’t have to select it, it is the default printer, unless you want to choose something else, that’s the one that will come up.

The aorist tense in Greek that you can find referred to in textbooks and commentaries, the aorist tense was the default tense. That is, the tense the author would use unless he had some reason to use something else. This perspective on Greek determines the way we analyze the language. Again, if you are a non-Greek or non-Hebrew reader, you are reliant mainly on commentaries and other tools to help you. But this helps us I think to avoid misunderstanding of Greek tenses. For example, you still find this often, although we are starting to learn to avoid it. You’ll still often find things in commentaries especially in more popular Bible studying tools, you’ll see things like the aorist tense was used to indicate the action was once and for all, it was urgent, or it was final. You’ll see things like that.

However, again if the aorist tense was the default tense, probably, we shouldn't as students make anything of the aorist tense. We can probably safe to move on from it. We should avoid commentaries that put a lot of stock in the aorist and make those kinds of statements about the aorist as instantaneously or once for all or indicated some special type of action. Actually, the opposite is true. The aorist tense was the tense used when the writer didn’t want to say anything specific about the action. It was the default tense. So be aware of yourself making too much of the aorist tense and be aware of commentaries and other tools that might make too much out of the aorist tense.

**Present Tense**

The present tense you’ll often see described in commentaries and other tools even popular biblical studies. You’ll often see the present tense described as, the present tense is used when the action is continuous, or habitual, or ongoing a long period of time. However, again, the present tense is simply used when the author wants to look at the
action as developing or unfolding, no matter how long or how short the action actually transpired. I’ve done some work with the present tense and I’ve found that sometimes the present tense is used in very short actions and sometimes used in very long actions. You can’t tell, except from the context. All the present tense does is as if the author enters the action to see its makeup, how it is developed. It’s a close-up look. It is a more close-up perspective of the action than the aorist tenses.

What that means, for example, is that sometimes the author might use the present tense to simply draw attention to an action in contrast the default aorist that just summarizes it. The author might use the present tense to focus more specifically or draw more attention to it. So what that means is you need to avoid comments on your own or beware of comments and commentaries and other tools that say the author used the present tense so he means a continuous action, repeated action, an ongoing action, or a habitual action or something like that. The present tense itself does not indicate that or whether an action is ongoing or habitual, you can only tell that from the context.

So be aware of using the present tense to draw illegitimate conclusions. Be especially aware of commentary and other tools that place a lot of stock on the present tense meaning that the action is ongoing or something like that. Again, often, in comparison to the aorist tense, the present will function when the author wants to take a little to perhaps focus on a little more detail than if he would have used an aorist tense.

**Conditionals**

Another example that you’ll find in grammars to be aware of, just to give you one other, is conditional statements. You’re aware of, you frequently use or read, conditional statements. It’s an if-then statement. If this, then that. So if I say, if the student studies Greek diligently, then she will receive an “A.” The main part of the sentence, “she will receive an A”, is conditioned on the first part, “if the student studies Greek diligently.” The fulfillment of an action “she will receive an A,” is conditioned on the “if” part, “if that person studies Greek diligently.”

Greek has an condition known as a first class condition construction. You’ll often find commentaries and other tools say that when there is a first class condition, you’ll see
that language, first class condition, you should translate it “since.” That is if the “if” part actually means that it is already happening. So since you are studying Greek, you will receive an “A.”

So you will often find that commentaries and other tools of locating first class condition sentences in Greek and therefore drawing the conclusion that it is actually happening. It should be translated “if”, it’s not strong enough, but you should translate it “since.” The problem with that is that there are too many instances where that isn’t the case in the New Testament. And so, for example, Matthew chapter 12 verse 27. I think it is. Jesus is in conflict with the Pharisees who have accused him of casting out demons in the name of Satan. And Jesus responds by saying, “If I cast out demons by the name of Beelzebul, then by whose power do you cast them out?” That’s a first class sentence, if Jesus said, “If I, Jesus, am casting out demons.” That’s a first class sentence. So should we translate that “since”? Is Jesus saying, “Since I am casting out demons”? There are all kinds of examples like that so just beware of commentaries that place a lot of weight on first class conditions and say it should be translated “since.” The point of all this in a sense that Greek is a language like any other language and it is illegitimate to project too much precision into it, or to expect too much out of it. Yes, it is a completely adequate means of God’s communication and revelation to his people in the first century. But at the same time, it is certainly illegitimate to treat it in a way that is unnatural. My point is, be aware in your own analysis, and be aware when you read commentaries and other tools of those that would demand too much precision of the language and make it do things that it is really not meant to do. We may put too much stock in little grammatical nuances. But again, you have to use commentaries and other tools because you’re Greek-less or Hebrew-less, which is fine, but you have to use other tools to help you make grammatical observations but be aware of those that over analyze the parameters.

**Translation**

One example that we’ve already looked at that might helpful in understanding how grammar can make a difference and we talked about this in relationship to translation. But translation is an issue and this text is actually a grammatical one. That section in
Ephesians chapter 5, in verse 18, we find a well-known imperative to not be drunk with wine but to be filled by the Spirit. If you have a rather literal wooden translation, you'll see that what follows in the English translation is a series of participles, at least in English they are often translated with a form of the verb with “-ing” in the end. So you’ll see a series of participles after verse 18. So he says “don’t get drunk with wine, which is debauchery but instead be filled with the spirit, [literally] speaking to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord, giving thanks to God the father for everything.” All those participles, “singing,” “speaking” and “giving thanks,” they all go back and modify the command “to be filled with the spirit.” I think they are simply explaining and describing what that means and what does it looks like. Interestingly, though, and again this is where English translations differ. What do we do with verse 21, which most English translations seems to translate as a separate verse and some of them even begin a new paragraph. But actually verse 21, submitting to one another, verse 21 the verb “submit” is another participle in this string of participles that probably go back to the command “to be filled with the spirit.” So a better way to read this text then would be “don't be drunk with wine but be filled with the spirit” which means “speaking to each other in songs and spiritual song, singing and making music to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, and submitting to one another.” So submitting to one another is part of what it means to be filled with the Spirit. So grammatically, what you do with that verse and even comparing English translations might make a difference in how you interpret this text.

Connectors

Another thing to pay attention to, especially in English translation, with English translations this can even be done but it’s at times a little more accurately with the Greek text and that is to pay attention to connectors such as the “but’s” and the “and’s” and “therefore’s” and “whenever” or “because” or “for.” Those words function to connect or even clauses or sentences or paragraphs. It is important to understand the force of connectors. Again, the “therefore’s” and the “but’s” and the “because of” this or something like that. Try to determine what that says about the relationship of the words
or paragraphs or sentences to each other. That is part of helping to trace the flow of thought through the passage.

Again, to consider different literary types, this is probably more significant in particularly in Epistolary literature that often depends on tightly knit argument that moves from line to line or verse to verse or whatever. Again, with narrative literature, we are mainly interested in connection between paragraphs and how the story develops. So sometimes the detail grammar of the verses themselves and the sentences are not as important as what is going on with the story at the paragraph level.

The other thing though with connectors, and this isn’t the only way to identify relationships between sentences, sometimes you have to still identify what’s the relationship between this verse and the one that comes before or the one that comes after it. What is the relationship of this paragraph to the previous one? But even with connectors, even when you have the help of connectors, like a “therefore” or a “but” or a “because” or an “in order that” or something like that, even then, it is difficult to tell what are they connecting. Are they simply connecting two words? Are they connecting sentences? Are they connecting paragraphs? All I am saying is you need to work with the text and try to figure out the function of each section. What is this sentence doing here? What is the verse doing here? How does it work in the entire paragraph?

A good example that is even revealed in the English translation is Romans chapters 5 and verse 12. This is a section that begins a comparison that Paul makes between Christ and Adam where he compares and contrasts what the act of Adam in sinning, what that did to the human race, which now is corrected and reversed in the one act of Jesus Christ, the obedience of Christ, that is his death on the cross. This comparison and contrast between Adam and Christ is introduced by an interesting construction. Most English translations say “therefore” so I am looking at the NIV version and it says “therefore sin entered the world through one man.” Other translations might be a little more wooden and literal and translate it closer to the Greek text which is “because of this,” literally “because of this, just as sin entered into the world” and he goes on to the comparison.
The question is, what is the “because of this” indicating? Well, obviously, it is showing that something has happened and previously that is a cause of this comparison between Adam and Christ. Something Paul has just said, “because of this” because of something he just said, now he launches into a comparison between Adam and Christ. But the debate is, what is Paul referring to? Because of what? Is Paul referring back, for example, to the previous verse? In verse 11 of Romans 5, Paul ends by saying, “not only is this but we also now rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have now received reconciliation.” So is it because of that statement or is the “because of this” or “therefore” refer to chapter 5 verse 1-11. Does it refer back to the entire first eleven verses of chapter 5? Or does it go back earlier? Perhaps it goes back all the way back to chapter 3 verse 21 where Paul begins explicitly to discuss justification by faith? Or does it go all the way back to chapter one and in verse eighteen which is the beginning of the body of the letter to the Romans? So, sometimes it’s difficult to tell exactly what do some of these lines such as “therefore” or “because of” or “for” or “whenever” or “consequently” or words that are sometimes going to be difficult to know what it is connecting back to, how far should we go back. That’s all part of hermeneutics and interpretation and trying to put the text together to make sense of. One can wrestle with the grammar and the connection of clauses and words and paragraphs and things like that.

**Literary Context**

To move on from grammar and to discuss briefly and to broaden out from just words, looking at how words are combined into sentences and paragraphs, to broaden out and look at the entire literary context. So more broadly, you need to ask the question and look at how does it fit within the broader context or literary flow of the entire book. Or more specifically, if I am dealing with the text in the New or Old Testament, how does it relate to what goes before it, how does it grow out of it, how does it prepare for or relate to what comes after. You need to be able to explain how your text fits within the context, a very simple illustration of how this is important and how it is ridiculous to ignore this even within our own age is that none of us goes to a movie store or a Red Box or something like that and you check out a movie we’ve never seen. We take it home and
pop it in in our DVD player and then perhaps we choose scene selection and the menu “scene selection” comes up and we check and choose scene 17 and maybe when we get to scene 17 and we fast forward into the middle of it and then we watch ten minutes of it. I would expect that you would be left confused and having no idea of what in the world is going on. You want to know how the entire story develops. You want to know how the plot or argument unfolds and develops and so you can understand any given section in the movie. The same is true with the biblical text. I think one of the most important things you can do in hermeneutics or interpreting the biblical text and one of the most viable aspects is to be able to explain how your text contributes to the argument that is going on and to explain how your text fits where it is. What’s it’s doing there? What would it be missing if it wasn’t there? What is it contributing to the argument? How does it fit with or grow out of the previous section? How does it prepare for what comes after?

**Discourse Level Features**

And again, there can be a variety of type of relationships. Often depending on if you are dealing with narrative literature or whether you are dealing with epistolary literature. There can be a number of types of relationships between the paragraphs and the broader contexts, the broader sections of the text. There might be more of a chronological relationship, you’ll find this particularly in narratives although we said even in narrative things are not always arranged chronologically, but certain events might be arranged according to chronology. At times, certain sections might explain something that comes before. Your text might be an illustration that comes from something that has come before it. Your text might be the cause of something that comes before or after or may be a cause and effect relationship. It might be a question answer relationship. Your text might be answering a question that was raised in an earlier text. Your text might be arranged according to the particular or general. That is, your text might give the particulars of a general statement or might be a general summary of some particular example. So there are all kinds of possible relationships, comparisons and contrasts. Your text might be a contrast or comparison to something that may come before or after. So just be alert to a number of possibilities of how, and more important than these labels is
simply be able to explain what is your text doing here in this context. How does it grow out of what comes before? How does it relate to what comes after it? At times, this can be the most important facet of interpreting biblical texts. Sometimes we will misunderstand the text or at least not understand it clearly until we understand how it fits within the broader context.

A very simple example that many others have pointed to as well, but it is an easy one and an easy entry point into thinking about context is the example from Philippians chapter 4 and verse 13. You probably have heard it quoted in a variety of different ways. In chapter 4 verse 13, Paul says “I can do everything through him who gives me strength,” depending on your translation. So we take this text and we utilize it for justification for various things. I can take an exam that seems to be looming large and is too difficult and I don’t feel prepared for because I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me. I can get along with difficult family members or relatives or friends because I can do all things in Christ. Usually we apply it to areas within our life, a variety of areas that we find difficult, but we can rely on Christ’s strength to help us to overcome these obstacles or accomplish these tasks that appear impossible. I don’t want to deny that is indeed true, but I want to ask what does this verse mean. How does Paul seem to be using it? How does it contribute to the argument? What comes before it, particularly, and after it? Notice chapter 4 verse 13, if you back up, and I’ll start with verse 10, Paul says, “I rejoice greatly in the Lord that you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying it is because I am in need.” So he is responding to the concern of the Philippians. “I am not saying this because I have need.” Not because I want you to give me something and he says, “for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is like to be in need. I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want.” Here’s the secret of being content in every situation, whether you’re hungry and in need or struggling to get by or whether you have much. It’s “I can do everything through Christ who strengthens me.” Chapter 4 verse 13 is referring to Paul’s ability, Christ
enabling him to be in any circumstance whether he has abundance or whether he is struggling to survive and eke out of an existence.

**Importance of Context: Exodus 18**

So sometimes your ability to place a text in its context will have a profound effect on how you understand the text and even help to avoid misunderstanding. Let me give you a couple of examples. I’ll start with a couple from the Old Testament of how understand the context or how the argument develops and how that may make a difference in understanding the biblical text. The first example I want to take and utilize in the Old Testament comes from narrative, and that is the book of Exodus. Particularly, Exodus chapter 18 is the story of Jethro, Moses’s father in law, who is visiting him. Jethro comes to Moses and sees Moses is the leader of the Israelite nation and one of his responsibilities is to function as the judge. Jethro comes to visit Moses and sees him acting as a judge and Moses is, according to Jethro, Moses is basically wearing himself out and tiring himself out because he is trying to handle too much. Everyone’s bringing these cases large and small, significant and insignificant to Moses to settle and decide. He is functioning as the judge. So Jethro sees this and observes this and basically concludes that this really isn’t good Moses. You are wearing yourself out by trying to do too much. You are taking on all these cases, large and small, and settling them and you can’t do this and you can’t do it well. So Jethro’s solution is you need to delegate the minor cases to other qualified judges and you just take the big, important ones. And that’s what Moses does at the end of chapter 18 and brings that to a conclusion.

And the question is: why is this story in Exodus? There has been a number of suggestions and this story could be doing a number of things. I don’t want to say that what I am about to say is the only thing that it’s doing, but one of the more common suggestions historically, from the historical primitive approach sees this story as describing the origins of Israelites’ judicial systems and this is how it came about. So it is a storytelling or describing how the judicial system in Israelites' system emerged.

At least in more popular literature, a very common explanation, is chapter 18 of Exodus tells us or is an account of the importance of delegating responsibilities. So,
chapter 18 basically instructs Christians that we should not try to do things on our own. The instruction is the how to delegate authority and delegate responsibilities in the business world or in our other endeavors or even in church situations and ministry contexts or organizations. This is about delegating responsibilities and we find in the instructions the why and how to do it.

However, to me, I think the key to understanding this story, and chapter 18, is to place it within again, it’s broader context. To ask how it relates to what comes before and how it fits in to the narrative and the context that has gone on. One thing you will notice is, again ignore chapter and verse divisions which can be very important. We said before, chapter and verse divisions are not there to indicate key breaks or sections. They’re basically there to help us all get to the right place in the text. So ignoring chapter 18, what is interesting is chapter 18, the story of Moses and Jethro and Moses getting worn out by all these cases and Jethro having to tell him not to do that and give the lesser cases to someone else and to take the main ones for yourself, this comes right after, at the tail end, of a story that recounts Israel’s battle with the Amalekites in the end of chapter 17.

If you remember, that story is interesting too because Israel engages in a rather military type of strategy. Moses is standing on the mountain and watching this battle and as long as he keeps his arms up and hands up in the air, Israel wins but you have this interesting language of Moses is tired out. He gets worn out and tired. When his arms drop, Israel starts to lose. When he gets them back up, they win. But he can’t hold them up, so he ask two individuals to basically prop his arms up and hold them up so that Israel is victorious over the Amalekites. This is interesting. You actually have these two stories then, where Moses is portrayed as very human and very weak. He is too tired. He can’t handle the cases. All the judicial cases in chapter 18, are wearing him out. He can’t do it. In chapter 17, the battle of the Amalekites, he can’t even hold his hands out, it wears him out. He has to have someone to help him hold his hands up. So you have this interesting picture of Moses being worn out and tired out and being weak. He can’t do it. This is interestingly, when you place it in it’s even broader, context, later on in chapter 20, Moses is the one who is going to ascend on Mount Sinai and bring the law down in the
context of the flashing and thunder and lightning et cetera et cetera. Even before that, if you go back before that, this comes in as part of the story of Israel delivering Israel out of Egypt. So he is the one who gathers them and rallies them out of Egypt. He parts the Red Sea by lifting his staff. He supernaturally provides provisions for them, he provides water and the rock et cetera for the Israelites. So it’s interesting that Moses is portrayed in almost supernatural terms throughout the narrative of Exodus. Starting with the deliverance of Israel through the Red Sea, through the wilderness and all the ways Moses is an instrument of supernatural provision. His staff seems almost to have supernatural qualities to it.

But now, in chapter 18, as well as this battle with the Amalekites, in chapter 17, Moses is portrayed as this weak person who gets worn out and he can’t do it. And the question is: why would the author portray Moses in these terms when he’s almost been a superhero? In fact, one commentary observed that up until this point, Moses had been portrayed in supernatural terms. Now he is portrayed as a weak and as a very human individual. He can’t even hold his arms up to win this battle. He can’t handle all these cases, it’s wearing him out. How do we understand this story in chapter 18 in light of this broader context?

In the next session, I want to return back to this story and we will try to answer that question. How does chapter 18 of Exodus, this portrayal of Moses, portrayed as a very weak human being, how does this function in a broader context of Exodus? How does that make a difference in the way we read it?

Transcribed by Cheng Quang and Paul Leary
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt