

Descriptions of the Genres of the Bible (Genres are types of literature)

When we understand the message the original author intended for the original audience in their cultural and historical context, we can then rightly apply their message to our own lives.

Law

- Law is the expression of God's will and character.
- God gave over 600 laws to the Jews that defined their proper relationship with God, to one another, to outsiders (the alien), and the world around them. Law is found in the instructions and precepts of Moses.
- Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* is law *and* the fulfillment of the law. The Apostle Paul's charges to the churches are law.
- The law is a mirror to our soul pointing to our inability to keep it and thus, to our depravity and need for a Savior; the only way we can keep the law is by the Holy Spirit, not by our own efforts.

Narrative

- A historical account; a chronicle of events as they happened.

Records

- Genealogies, documents, accounts, and other lists.

Wisdom

- **Conventional (or proverbial) wisdom** – Sayings that focus on questions about the meaning of life, practical living, and common sense. Based on experience + observation (cause/effect patterns) + faith/reason = Revelation
- **Critical (or speculative) wisdom** – addresses hard questions of life that are not answered by simple, if-then formulas.
- Both conventional and critical wisdom contrast our faulty human wisdom to God's perfect wisdom, warning us of the destruction of living outside of God's wisdom, not because God is vengeful, but because only His wisdom leads to life.

Poetry

- **Prose** – distinguished from poetry by its irregularity and variety of rhythm; closer to the patterns of everyday speech.
- **Poetry** – Biblical Old Testament poetry is Hebrew and does not translate well into English. It is based on a tempo of stanzas and phrases that are re-told differently called *synonymous parallelism*, conveying the same ideas in contrasting or similar ways. *Antithetic parallelism* is contrasting stanzas and is predominant in Proverbs.

Gospel

- *Gospel* means the *good news* of salvation we receive through Jesus Christ.
- The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each present the teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus in distinct, but not contradictory, ways to different audiences.
- The Gospels contain a bit of all genres and are not necessarily in chronological or sequential order, except for Luke.

Parable

- Instructional, narrative teachings of Jesus told as short stories or illustrations that used everyday life examples that may or may not have actually taken place.
- Jesus often taught the parables using his surroundings and environment, such as the lilies, grain fields, and vines.
- Their meaning was not immediately apparent, and therefore, required further scrutiny and a desire to understand them; so, they separated the sincere from the insincere.

Epistle

- Personal, instructional letters written by the Apostles to specific churches.
- They begin with the name of the writer and recipient, a greeting, a purpose, the central message, and a closing.
- Their purpose was to: teach doctrine, expose false teaching, give correction, answer questions, clarify previous letters, challenge the church to focus on Christ, comfort, strengthen, and equip the church.

Prophecy

- The prophets were mouthpieces of God.
- **Didactic prophecy** challenges and warns people with truth, exposing sin and calling for repentance and obedience.
- **Predictive prophecy** foretells an event or predicts the future. There are over 2,000 specific predictions that have already come to pass, hundreds of years after the authors' death!
- In the New Testament, prophecy is found in Matthew 24 and Revelation.

Apocalyptic

- A form of prophecy focused on the end times, apocalyptic writing allows glimpses of future events while keeping the full meaning hidden for a time. We do not have access to this full meaning.
- It combines narrative and prose, and recounts visions from God written in vivid imagery with poetic phrases and symbols that are exaggerated for a purpose.



Genres of Each Book in the Bible

Old Testament

Book	Genre	Summary/Theme
Genesis	Historical Narrative	Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph
Exodus	Historical Narrative + some Laws	Moses and deliverance from Egypt
Leviticus	Narrative , ancient Laws	Forgiveness through blood sacrifice, regulations to live in fellowship with God
Numbers	Narrative , Laws , Prophecy , Poetry (vs 23-24)	Wilderness years to the edge of the promised land
Deuteronomy	Narrative , Law	Moses' final speeches and reminders to the people
Joshua	Historical Narrative	Conquest and settling of Canaan
Judges	Narrative , Poetry /song (Ch. 5)	Cycles of apostasy, oppression, repentance and restoration
Ruth	Narrative	Redemption and restoration; from emptiness to fullness
1 Samuel	Historical Narrative/Account	Biographies of Samuel, Saul and David
2 Samuel	Historical Narrative , a little Poetry	David's life as king
1 Kings	Selective Record/Account	Solomon's life and other kings
2 Kings	Selective Record/Account	Kings from Israel and Judah
1 Chronicles	Genealogy, historical Narrative , some Poetry	Focus on Davidic kings
2 Chronicles	Selective Record/Account	Same time period as 1&2 Kings, focus on kings of Judah
Ezra	Court documents , Lists , Narratives	Ezra led 2nd group of exiles to reestablish Israelite community
Nehemiah	Nehemiah's memoirs and official Lists	Nehemiah leads Israelites to rebuild/dedicate Jerusalem's walls
Esther	Historical Narrative	Providence, woman of integrity, rest from enemies
Job	Critical Wisdom , Poetry , Narrative prologue/epilogue	Human suffering/God's goodness
Psalms	Poetry , Israel's hymnal	Praise, thanksgiving, lament, petition to God, trust in God, wisdom
Proverbs	Conventional Wisdom written in Poetry	Wisdom vs folly, sexual purity, integrity of speech
Ecclesiastes	Wisdom in Prose and Poetry	All is vanity unless one lives in fear of and obedience to God
Song of Songs	Wisdom in Poetry , Narrative	Romantic love, desire, commitment
Isaiah	Prophecy , historical Narratives in Prose and Poetry	Judgment and comfort
Jeremiah	Prophecy , historical Narratives in Prose and Poetry	Faithful prophet points to new covenant
Lamentations	Lament in Poetry	Sorrow over Jerusalem's devastation by the Babylonians
Ezekiel	Prophecy , Apocalyptic , Prose and Poetry	Written from exile in Babylon, God's sovereign plan for them
Daniel	Prophecy , Apocalyptic - visions and interpretations	God's sovereignty, kingdoms of the world, God's kingdom
Hosea	Prophecy , a few historical Narratives and Poetry	God's unquenchable love
Joel	Prophecy in Poetry	Israel's judgment/restoration; "God will pour out His spirit on all flesh"
Amos	Prophecy and a small Narrative in Poetry	God's call for justice
Obadiah	Prophecy in Poetry	Warning to Edom, encouragement to Judah
Jonah	Narrative	God's universal love and concern
Micah	Prophecy in Poetry	Repent of idolatry/injustice or go into exile; restoration under Bethlehem Ruler
Nahum	Prophecy in Poetry	Judgment on Nineveh, God's wrath against sin
Habakkuk	Prophecy in dialogue, prayer in Poetry	God's honor/sovereignty in the face of evil. Habakkuk worships.
Zephaniah	Prophecy in Poetry	Coming judgment on Judah to exile and later restoration to righteousness
Haggai	Prophecy in sermons written in Prose	God's command to rebuild the temple; the people obeyed willingly
Zechariah	Prophecy with visions in Prose and a little Poetry	Jerusalem's glorious future, God's Servant/Branch
Malachi	Prophecy in Prose	Rebuke, purify yourself; prophecy of coming Messenger

New Testament

Matthew	Gospel	Biography, a proclamation
Mark	Gospel	Use of present tense to describe action
Luke	Gospel	Closer to a historical account than the other Gospels
John	Gospel	Simple, but elegant Greek with limited vocabulary
Acts	Historical Narrative with early Christian speeches	by Luke
Romans	Epistle from Paul - from Corinth to Roman Christians	Righteousness, law, sin, justification, sanctification
1 Corinthians	Epistle from Paul - from Ephesus to Corinth	Christian unity, morality, spiritual gifts, the resurrection
2 Corinthians	Epistle	Addresses 1st Epistle; Apostolic authority, new covenant, sacrificial giving
Galatians	Epistle from Paul to Galatia	Salvation by faith alone, freedom from law, walk by the Holy Spirit
Ephesians	Epistle from Paul - from Roman prison to Ephesus/nearby churches	Holy conduct, grace, heavenly places, mystery, the church
Philippians	Epistle from Paul - from Roman prison to Philippi	Unity, humility, gratitude, joy, knowing Christ, Christ's Lordship
Colossians	Epistle from Paul - from Roman prison to Colossae	To combat dangerous teaching; Jesus Christ is preeminent Lord
1 Thessalonians	Epistle from Paul - from Corinth to Thessalonica	To give correct understanding on the coming of Christ; holy living
2 Thessalonians	Epistle from Paul - from Corinth to Thessalonica	To correct doctrinal error on the return of Christ; stand firm, man of lawlessness
1 Timothy	Epistle from Paul - from Macedonia to Timothy in Ephesus	Help with false teachers, encouragement, church leadership, sound doctrine, etc.
2 Timothy	Epistle from Paul - from Roman prison to Timothy and Mark	Divine election, inspiration of Scripture, sound doctrine, being not ashamed
Titus	Epistle from Paul - from Macedonia or Ephesus to Titus	Sound teaching, reminder of the gospel (3:4-7), elders, proper conduct
Philemon	Epistle from Paul - from Roman prison to Philemon...	urging him to forgive Onesimus, his runaway slave who became a Christian
Hebrews	Epistle	To wean Jewish Christians from depending on the law, new covenant
James	Epistle from James (brother of Jesus) to Jewish Christians	Faith/works, trials/temptations, rich/poor, the tongue, patience, persecution
1 Peter	Circular Epistle from Peter to several churches	Hope in suffering, holiness, humility, submission
2 Peter	Circular Epistle from Peter to several churches	Election, false teachers, Day of the Lord
1 John	Epistle from John to Christians near Ephesus	Love/hate, light/dark, life/death, fellowship, incarnation of Christ
2 John	Epistle from John to an elect lady and children	To combat false teaching
3 John	Epistle from John to Gaius	Welcomed those with truth and rejected Diotrephes who rejected them
Jude	Epistle from Jude to Christians	Condemn false teachers, spiritual warfare, contending for the faith
Revelation	Apocalyptic , Prophecy - a vision from John exiled on the island called Patmos to seven cities in Roman Asia written by divine orders.	Call to repent/remain faithful, predicts near/remote future events; Jesus is Lord and will bring the kingdom of God to its glorious culmination!

Understanding Bible Genres

Understanding **the genre and context** of Bible passages **leads to** an understanding of **the author's original intent** which **leads to** a sound understanding of **how to apply the text to our own lives**.

Genre and Context

Genre is the literary type of each book. For example, portions of the Old Testament are narratives (true stories) with characters and plots; they are accounts of what happened in which we see God at work. The people are not always models to emulate, but examples of how God worked through ordinary people to speak to them about Himself.

Other portions of Scripture contain law, poetry, and bits of profound wisdom, while others contain the cries of the prophets as they allowed God to speak through them.

The New Testament contains narratives of the life of Jesus Christ and of the lives of his people filled with His Holy Spirit; letters of instruction and encouragement from Jesus' disciples and apostles to the churches in various cities; and John's detailed vision in the book of Revelation – the unveiling of what is happening in the heavens that mirrors the visions of Ezekiel, Daniel and other prophets hundreds of years prior to John's vision.

Context – Each sentence of Scripture should be understood within the larger context of the paragraph, chapter and book surrounding it. Context includes the book's history and culture that helps us understand the author's intent. God revealed truth according to the recipient's ability to grasp it; He used aspects of their cultures to help them understand eternal truths. God has always met us where we were and spoken truth in a way we could see it through our particular lenses.

Here are examples of how the understanding of the **1) Genre**, **2) Cultural Context**, and **3) Author's Original Intent** help us to soundly **apply the text to our lives**:

Wrong Interpretation →	Understanding 1) The Genre of Poetry →	Right Interpretation
Psalm 91:1 says, He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. In the past, I dissected this verse to try to find the difference between its first and second half, i.e., the difference between <i> dwell </i> and <i> abide </i> and between <i> shelter </i> and <i> shadow </i> .	Often in Hebrew poetry, <i> synonymous parallelism </i> is used. In this form of poetry, phrases are repeated, but in different ways for emphasis or for the beauty of the word combinations. After all, it is a song! The author did not mean there to be a difference between the two parts of this verse.	It is simply a beautiful thing to live in God!
Wrong Interpretation →	Understanding 2) The Culture of Corinth →	Right Interpretation
From 1 Corinthians, Chapters 12, 13 and 14 – I should desire specific and more “elite” gifts of the spirit. Some people are just more special than others (wrong!).	The city of Corinth during Paul's life was rampant with sexual sin, pagan temple feasts, and the influence of Hellenistic Dualism which taught that certain people were the “elite” because of certain gifts. Certain people in the Corinthian church were making themselves superior or “elite” because of specific gifts – in particular, the gift of tongues.	Therefore, it was necessary for Paul to emphasize their <i> unity </i> on the basis of <i> diversity </i> , not <i> uniformity </i> . Chapter 13:1 infers that <i> speaking with the tongues of angels </i> was their understanding of true spirituality. Paul said, <i> NO, it's how you LOVE others </i> .
Wrong Interpretation →	Understanding 3) Psalmist's Original Intent →	Right Interpretation
Years ago, I was having difficulty making a decision about whether or not to buy a house. I read Psalm 84:3 – “The bird also has found a house and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young...” I took this as a sign and interpreted it as, “God provides a home for everyone and so it is a good idea to buy this house.”	In Psalm 84, the Psalmist yearned to be in the courts of God's temple. In Old Testament times, the temples represented God's presence, which gave the Psalmist his greatest joy. He writes that, just as the bird has found a home, he, too, has found his home at God's altar.	God's presence is our home. No matter where we are, we are always at home, because He is with us, in us, and we are in Him! This knowledge gives us great joy!

