

# Part 6. Taking Scripture seriously: How does this passage fit?

*Noticing how a particular passage fits into the flow of a book, or the flow of Scripture as a whole. How this helps us understand faithfully.*

We should not drag verses or sentences kicking and screaming out of the body of Scripture. If we did we'd be forced to admit that the Bible says, more than once, "*There is no God.*" (Ps 10:4; 14:1; 53:1) Often a particular "verse" offers a preacher a convenient summary of a passage, but we can only be sure of this by studying the passage as a whole.

It's more than just the words around a verse though, at the end of Job (42:7) we are told by God that Eliphaz and his two friends "*have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.*" If we were to base teaching on something from one of their speeches in the body of the book, even if we read a whole chapter, we'd risk misrepresenting God!

So, should we just write off Job's friends' words? Cut them from Scripture? No, for "*all scripture is inspired by God, and useful...*" (2 Tim 3:16), but we do need to read the parts in the light of the bigger picture. Job's friends warn us that truth can be used to misrepresent God. (See video Eliphaz: truth into lies).

For a couple more nice examples of this see Paul Windsor's *Art of Unpacking* post "bigger than 6.8"

## **The thigh bone is connected to the**

# hip bone...



Photo by Sergei Golyshev

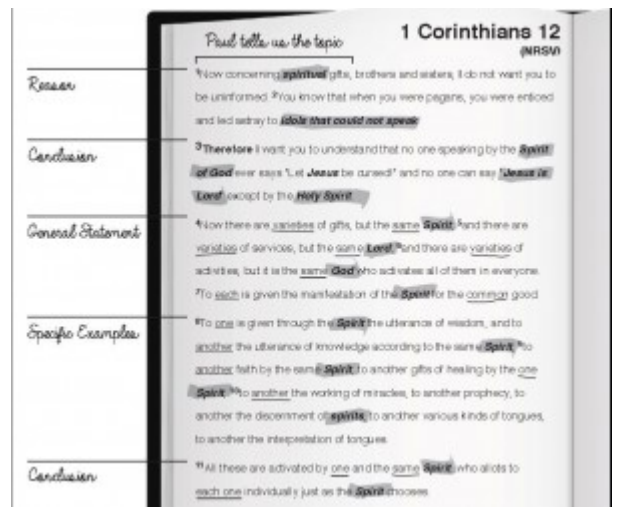
Any Bible book is made up of parts, even the tiny books Obadiah and Jude. These parts work together. So, to read a “part” faithfully is to seek to discover its function in the whole. Duval and Hays in their excellent *Journey into God’s Word* offer a list of ways in which parts of a paragraph or chapter work together:

- **General and specific:** often Scripture moves from general statements to specific examples. Jesus does this at the end of Matthew 5 (in v.17ff. saying he came to fulfil not abolish biblical laws then, vv.21-47, giving examples of what this means. Paul follows Ephesians 5:21 with examples for the next 30 or so verses until 6:9.
- **Questions and answers:** are a favorite way for Paul to argue (e.g. the questions in Rom 3:1).
- **Dialogue:** as well as cases like Job (or a story) where conversation is obvious and vital, the prophets and Jesus often respond to “opponents” (in the prophets this can be difficult to spot, but crucial for understanding).
- **If... then...** not just where those words are used, but in other cases where certain conditions lead to a result.
- **Means and results** can also be really helpful to spot.

*The example in the picture (click to see it full size) shows one way to do this “plotting”,*

it can be even better with lines connecting significant features (pic. by Nathan Clark)

As we saw last session “conjunctions” (words like: but, however, therefore, because...) often signal such relationships in a passage. Plotting these relationships between parts (using lines, arrows and brief words to highlight what is going on) is really useful at the level of both passages and books. It is a simple tool that can save us from the “There is no God” mistake.



For an example of how this works in a story (not using one of the categories listed above) see the video “Jonah’s Psalm”

## The Big Story

The big story, or “metanarrative” (your long word of the month), of the Bible is also crucial for understanding the parts. That big story is expressed in different ways, with different numbers of elements, by different people, but runs something like this:

- God is the one and only maker of all, beside God there are no other “powers”
- God’s good creation is spoiled by sin
- God loves, and desires to bless, all creation
- God chooses, first Israel (OT) and then any who will respond (NT), as carriers of this blessing
- Blessing alone cannot cure human sin, or its consequences
- God becomes “one of us” in Jesus and dies to put things right

The putting right is still potential, not yet fully realised, though it will be “one day”

Most Bible passages focus on one (or two) of these elements more than others. So Acts 5:1-11 focuses on sin and its consequences, whereas 5:12-16 shows God’s blessing breaking in. If we read about God’s blessing, but fail to situate it in the whole story, we risk reducing God to a god from whom we can extract the things we want. Job’s friends illustrate this sort of danger, they wanted a tidy god who would bless good people and punish bad ones (e.g. Job 4:7ff.), God is more complex and had chosen Job as champion to prove Satan wrong (see Job 1:8-12).

## Book level connections

Sometimes Scripture works at book level. Obadiah and Jonah sit side by side because reading either alone risks either missing the full truth of God. They are both short books, read them and see what I mean!

In English Bibles the book of Ruth follows the horrible stories at the end of Judges, so while we are forced to recognise the depths of human depravity we can also glimpse humans who display faithful kindness (*hesed*, see last month) like God’s. The book ends with a genealogy of David (via a foreign woman, Ruth) while David’s story in Samuel sadly pivots around the king’s abuse of power. He desires Bathsheba, also a foreign woman, takes her and kills her husband. The story of Ruth in a way redeems Judges and David (in Samuel).

(Audio link: Ruth: At last a nice story!)

## Homework

This article again contains a lot of ideas in condensed form, several of the links above fill it out. You can also explore answers to the questions raised above or ask your own

questions.