

Bridging the Gap between the World of Scripture and our World

God's Word speaks to two worlds—the world of its original readers (e.g., Christians living in first-century Philippi) as well as our own world. The following discussion aims at describing *how* Scripture speaks to our world.

(1) Understanding the Gap (Identifying Discontinuities)

It is important to recognize that significant gaps exist between *our* world and the world of the original recipients. These gaps are cultural, personal and redemptive-historical.

The **culture** of first-century Palestine differs significantly from twenty-first century North American culture. Scripture was not written in English but in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Moreover, the customs of first-century Palestine are quite different from our own. For example, American marriage customs differ significantly from first-century Palestine. In addition to cultural differences, **personal** gaps also exist between us and the original recipients. Paul did not write Philippians to *me* but a specific group of Christians living in that ancient city. We also encounter **redemptive-historical** gaps as we read Scripture because there are important *developments* in God's story. Christians, for example, no longer follow the ceremonial law by offering animal sacrifices for sin because Christ's death did away with the need for such sacrifices (cf. Hebrews 8-10).

As we read Scripture, it is particularly important that we understand the chapter of God's story in which a particular passage or narrative is set. These cultural, personal and redemptive historical differences constitute gaps between the world of the Scripture and our world. We will use the term “discontinuities” to describe these gaps.

(2) Bridging the Gap (Identifying Continuities)

Although important cultural, personal and redemptive gaps (discontinuities) exist between the world of the original recipients of Scripture and our world, we share at least three things in common with these men and women. First, we worship the **same God** they did (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). God's character does not change (Mal. 3:6). The Psalmist, writing several millennia before us, celebrates God as a compassionate Father who cares tenderly for his children (Psalm 103:13) and this is the same God we worship.

Second, we share a **common human nature** (both fallen and redeemed) with the original recipients of Scripture. We are subject to the same failures, the same joys, the same sufferings and the same weaknesses. When James warns his original readers against a spirit of boasting that arises from the arrogant assumption that humans control their destiny (James 2:13-17), we can see our own pride. When Jeremiah chastises his people for abandoning God, “the fountain of living waters,” in order to dig out “broken cisterns that can hold no waters” (Jeremiah 2:13), we can see how we too are idolaters who look for life apart from God in money, power, etc. When Paul enumerates the fruit

which the Spirit will produce in the lives of Christians in Galatia (Galatians 5:22-23), this is the very same fruit we see in our own lives as we walk with Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we are participants in the **same redemptive story**. Scripture tells one unfolding story of redemption. Although there are twists and turns in this story, God's ultimate purpose remains unchanged—to gather a community of redeemed people for his glory. When we recognize that Scripture tells one story, we will begin to see “redemptive” themes that run through the entire story. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture exposes our fallen condition and points us to our need for a savior. (Of course the precise *way* that Scripture exposes our fallen condition and points us to a Savior in Genesis will differ from Galatians.) When we read Scripture as one story, we follow the example and teaching of Jesus: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

(3) Discerning the Theological Big Idea (TBI)

After we have identified continuities and discontinuities, we are in a position to discern the **Theological Big Idea** of the passage. To arrive at the Theological Big Idea (TBI), we must restate the Author's Big Idea (ABI) in light of the continuous story of redemption through Jesus Christ. The TBI is a restatement of the ABI in a way that is (1) faithful to the passage, (2) God-centered (vs. man-centered or moralistic), (3) relates the big idea to the larger story of Scripture, (4) true for this present chapter in God's story and (5) for general application (this statement will not be bound to the time, people and events of the passage; it will have broader application and fuller theological development).

Example #1: Lev 5:14-6:7

- ABI: Moses commands the Israelites to offer animal sacrifices.
- TBI: God requires sacrifices for sin.

Example #2: Eph 2:1-10

- ABI: Paul proclaims that when they were dead in sin God made them alive with Christ by his grace so they are now God's workmanship created for good works.
- TBI: God brings dead sinners to life by his grace so that they become his workmanship created for good works

Example #3: Eph. 4:1-16

- ABI: Paul exhorted them to walk in a manner worthy of their calling by preserving the unity of the body and using their unique gifts to build up the body of Christ so that they will all move toward maturity in Christ.
- TBI: God enables believers to walk worthy of their calling and move toward maturity by providing gifted leaders to build up the body of Christ.

Example #4: 2 Timothy 2:1-13

- ABI: Paul charges Timothy to join him in suffering for the gospel as he remembers the risen and rewarding Christ.
- TBI: The grace of the risen Christ enables believers to endure hardship for the gospel as they remember the risen and rewarding Christ.

Example #5: Mark 5

- ABI: Jesus sends out unclean spirits from a Gerasene man and heals a woman who hemorrhaged for twelve years on his way to raise a twelve-year-old girl from the dead to emphasize the need for faith rather than fear.
- TBI: Jesus, who has all authority over spiritual forces, physical bodies and even life itself, calls every man and woman to respond to him in faith, rather than fear.

Summary:

To apply Scripture properly, we must cross the “theological bridge” that spans the gap between the world of the text and our world. This process is summarized below.

