

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 30

Studying the Original Languages of the Bible: Introduction to Word Meaning (Part 1 of 4-part series)

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Summary

In this episode, the series on taking Bible study seriously transitions to word level research by overviewing some directions we'll take as we think about studying biblical words.

Transcript

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

We're going to shift gears on the podcast now. We've spent a lot of time talking about interpreting scripture in light of its own context. We talked about worldview context and lots of historical backgrounds and becoming acquainted with ancient literature that helps us think the writer's thoughts after him (helps us sort of recapture mentally the worldview of the biblical writer so we can partake in the intellectual tradition that was going on around him—the intellectual source material that really formed his worldview). So we spent a lot of time talking about that and resources for doing that, and then in this series on interpreting the Bible in light of its own context, we shifted into literary contexts (different genres). That was all a precursor to what we're going to embark on today, and that is we're going to get into *words*: word-level meaning, working in the text at the word level—specifically interpreting the words that we read in a given passage.

This is going to be sort of a precursor episode, something that will set up the next few episodes in the series. So take it for what it is. Just by way of introduction, I want to start you thinking about the kinds of things that we sort of assume that may not really be true or may not really be good thinking when it comes to studying the words (the text) of scripture. We also need to start thinking about the stuff that will make us better thinkers—what we *do* need to consider and things we need to do to get things right when it comes to interpreting words (doing word studies).

I think you can already tell that I'm going to go beyond what people traditionally think of as word studies. While it's good, people using things like *Strong's Concordance* to do "word studies" is actually pretty primitive, pretty simplistic. The pejorative term would be "shallow," but I don't want to be pejorative here because I remember in my own personal Bible study that when I finished reading

the Bible once or twice, the very first thing I bought after that was a *Strong's Concordance*. Someone told me that was what I needed to do. And that was a great tool! For where I was at the time, that was something I really benefited a lot from. The problem is that today we have a lot of pastors that are using *Strong's Concordance* to do word study in preparation for sermons. This is something a lay person should be doing. For my money, I think lay people are capable of so much more, that they should be graduating from *Strong's* kind of material pretty quickly. But the reality is that they don't. Even people who occupy our pulpits are using tools like this that are really sub-par. It's not just an issue of tools. It's an issue of thinking well about what you're actually trying to do when we think of word studies. It goes beyond looking something up in a dictionary or a lexicon. Grammar matters for meaning, and a host of other things matter for meaning. So when I talk about studying words, yes, I'm going to be talking about and doing some things that might remind you of this thing other people call "word studies," but it's just a lot bigger and broader than that.

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By way of introduction, I want to sort of prep you to help you see the problems. And really, if you're familiar with word studies as people know it and as it's known today... Using things like *Strong's Concordance* and looking things up by *Strong's* numbers and then you get a list of possible meanings and that's it—that's your word study. Pick one! This is going to go well beyond that. I want to talk about word fallacies. I want to talk about mistakes that are made. I want to talk about errors in thinking.

So by way of getting started down that road (we're going to be spending a few podcast episodes on this whole issue), I want you to consider a few introductory thoughts in this episode.

First of all, words mean nothing by themselves. Words literally don't mean *anything*. To illustrate this, visualize in your mind that if you were sitting here with me at a computer screen or we were in a classroom and I was at a white board and I wrote the word R-U-N on the board. I turned to you and asked you, "What does that mean?" What would you say? It wouldn't take long to realize that, frankly, the possibilities are just myriad. You really don't know what it means because you don't have any sort of context for it. It's just sitting there by itself. R-U-N, run. I'm asking you what that means and, frankly, as you stare at it and think about it, it doesn't mean anything because it could mean practically anything.

For instance, if you looked up "run" in the dictionary... You don't even know if it's a noun or a verb. If you assumed it was a noun, what you're going to actually find is close to twenty different meanings *just* for the noun. Let me give you a few. *Run* could be a score in a baseball game. It could be a race, like "the first *run*" of some particular tournament. It could actually be a noun and not a verb. Two years ago, my wife and I painted our house by hand. Because we're not professionals, you could walk around our house and you will see a *run* at certain points of the house. It's a drip! It dripped, it solidified, it's dried there. Is that what R-U-N means? It could be a continued series, like of a book: a print *run*. It's a

series in continuous fashion of, in this case, something that's printed on paper. A *run* could be an animal path (a dog run at a rest stop or something like that). You get the idea. So even if you could assume correctly that it's a noun (and you can't if it's just R-U-N out there in space or on a white board or on a computer screen with nothing around it), it really doesn't mean anything because it could mean almost anything. There's great variability. You must know certain things about that word before you can even begin to think well about it at all.

If it was a verb, then you're even in more of a pickle. If you go back to your Webster's Dictionary and you look up *run* and you consider the verbal possibilities, now you're dealing with fifty or more meanings for R-U-N. Is it something that's faster than a walk? Is it trying to win a political office (to *run* for president)? Is it a machine that's operating (the machine is *running*)? "*Run* that machine over there!" Is it something that's spreading out? "Something has *run* all over the table." Is it something that involves a collision? "Don't *run* into the wall!" There are literally fifty or so possibilities in a normal good collegiate dictionary—just look it up—for R-U-N. The word, by itself, means nothing. You're paralyzed by it. What you need is you need that word to appear in relationship to other words and also you need some sort of context.

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We've been spending a lot of time talking about context in the podcast. What I hope you realize by now is that when I use the word "context" (yes, I think you do get this by now), I'm not referring to something current, something like the "context of modern evangelicalism" or the Reformation or anything in the modern world. Really, when I say we're interpreting the Bible in its own context, I mean interpreting the Bible in the context in which it was produced/written. We're very clear on that. But have you picked up on the fact that there are actually *many* contexts? There's the context of worldview. There's a religious context. There are cultural contexts. There are literary contexts. And now when you get down to the word level, there are word-level contexts, as well. To know what any given word means, you must be proficient. You must have developed skills. You must be competent in all of those contexts. You need to be aware of them, you need to be thinking about them, you need to have good tools to help you think about them to build your awareness and raise that in your mind. Like tools in the belt. You need to be exercised, you need to be familiar with—through repetition and through doing this often enough—you need to be exercised so that these things come automatically to you, so that when you read something in scripture you're thinking about history, worldview, culture, religion, what's the literary context, what genre... all these sorts of things should just be immediate. Now we're getting into adding to all that the *word level context*.

What we usually think of as context when we're trying to figure out what words mean... Unfortunately, we think, "Okay, well, I'm looking at a Bible verse. I need to be aware of the paragraph." Well, you do, so that's okay. "And then I need to be aware of the immediately preceding paragraph and the immediately following paragraph. And that's my context." Well, I would suggest to you that this is not wrong, but it's just extraordinarily narrow and limited. Yes, you need to know

what's going on before your passage and immediately after your passage. That's true. But that's only one context, and it's actually really tiny one, too. It says nothing about these bigger contexts that we've been talking about.

For instance, without going back and doing all the backtracking through worldview, history, culture, religion, and literary that we've been spending time with on the podcast... Context (in terms of the writing) is actually bigger than just the paragraph before and the paragraph after. There's the context of the author of your book. In some cases, you're not going to know this because we don't know who wrote a particular book. But you know that a book was written so *somebody* wrote it. But your word meaning might be dictated, guided, or determined by how that word is used throughout the entire work—throughout the entire book. You might be looking at a very specific verse in John and you might not think (because of how we're trained, and I think we're often trained inadequately)... You might be thinking, "Okay, to understand what this word in John means, I need to look at the paragraph before, the paragraph after, maybe read through the whole chapter, and now I've got to make a decision. It never occurs to you to ask how else John uses this word in the entire book. Did John write anything else besides the Gospel of John? Well, sure he did! He wrote three letters: 1, 2, and 3 John. He also wrote the book of Revelation. So how does John use the words in other books?

Think of Paul. Paul wrote thirteen or so books of the New Testament. You might be looking at something in Galatians. Well, Paul wrote a lot of things! So it's not just looking at the immediately preceding and following paragraphs in some portion of Galatians that's going to really zero you in on the meaning of a particular word. It's certainly going to contribute, but you need to be thinking bigger than that. You need to be thinking about who the author was and what else he wrote and, "Did Paul ever use this word in this same context in another letter?" Has it occurred to you to look? So it's much wider than that.

And even wider than a book, there are often cases where word meaning is determined by the section of the Bible that it's in. For instance (this gets a little bit like genre), let's say that we have some large portion of scripture. Let's take Joshua and Judges. If you read a commentary and you read about the introduction to the book and what scholars think about the authorship of this book, you would very quickly discern whether you're in evangelical circles or outside. It's a pretty common assumption that it's believed that the same person wrote Joshua and Judges. They're very close to each other. The same person would have been working on that and producing both of those books. That isn't something that is going to stick out to you because neither of the books assert or state who the author is, but there are lots of good reasons to think that the same person wrote both. If you were not aware of that and you were trying to do a word study in Judges but you never look at how a word is used in Joshua, you could really come out with a skewered conclusion about what's going on. So there's even the bigger issue of whole sections of scripture.

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Even when we don't have the same author in a section... Let's take the Psalms, or even one of the five books of the Psalms. You might not be aware that Psalms is divided into five books. A lot of your Bibles will mark those books. We have multiple authors in Psalms, but there's the same kind of literature. The books are typically arranged... there is actually some logic to this. You would know this if you were in the Psalms and trying to do a study there and you had read some background about the book—you would be alerted to this. If it occurs in the first book of the Psalms (which I think is the first 42, or something like that), then that might influence the way we look at the word that we're studying—again, thinking in bigger sections. So there might be some specific occasion to a larger section of scripture. Right away, we're well beyond this "immediately preceding and following paragraph" and all that sort of stuff. There's a lot to think about when it comes to studying words. That's what we want to do in the next few episodes of the podcast series.

To try to summarize all this that I've just sort of rambled a little bit on, when we talk about understanding word meaning, we need to ask, "What determines meaning?" And the answer is: context. "Context is king." Context always determines meaning.

But then we have to ask, "What does that mean? What does *context* mean?" Well, it means lots of things. There are lots of different contexts: worldview, historical, cultural, religious, literary, and then you get down to the word level and what we're going to find is that at the word level, word meaning is going to be determined by several things. This is a little bit of a preview of some things we'll get to in future episodes of the podcast. There is the *form* of a word. In academia, that's called "morphology." The way a word is shaped, or spelled, actually dictates meaning. Let me give you an example in English. If I put the word C-H-A-S-T-E on the board in our hypothetical classroom and asked you what it means, you would be able to sort of parse that out a little bit, at least giving me a few possibilities. If I added an "N" to it, I changed the shape/form of the word. Now it spells "chasten." Now what does it mean? Well, it means something quite different than "chaste," and all I did was add an "N." I changed the shape of the word. Word meaning is going to be affected by the shape or form of a word. So we'll get into that. Word meaning at the word level is going to be influenced by *word relationships*: a word's relationship to the words that are around it. We also just talked about how an author or how a section of scripture employs or uses a word. All of those things—the bigger contexts and then these word-level issues/contexts—combine and work together to produce what the scholar would call "a range of semantic possibilities" for the meaning of that word—a semantic range. It's far more complicated. It requires thinking. It's far more complicated than, "I'm going to look this word up in *Strong's Dictionary*, and Strong gives me four or five possibilities for what this Greek or Hebrew word means." Then what usually happens is that we look at our passage and we look at Strong's list and we sort of try to plug them in and we pick the one that we like, or we pick the one that we think works best. That isn't word study. What that is called is cherry-picking a lexicon, to be bluntly honest about it.

There are many more possibilities than you're going to find in a tool like Strong's (or a lot of other tools and lexicons) because it's very rare... There are some exceptions to this (some modern tools that will help you), but this is kind of an exhaustive process. It can take a person's whole lifetime to produce a lexicon and do all this kind of work for every word. You're not going to escape from having to think about things. And that's a good thing! But we need to be able to train ourselves to realize that there's no substitute for thinking. When we think about words, we need to be thinking about all these things we've been talking about—all these contexts. Once we do that, we will be able to develop our own range of semantic possibilities for a word, using different tools that will help us think, using different techniques that will help us think about a word. We can make a more intelligent choice. We can make a more informed choice and have a more informed understanding of what a particular word means in a particular place that we're trying to study a particular passage in the Bible.

So what I'm arguing for... I'm not going to give you a silver bullet that's going to give you the word meaning in every passage (and a given passage). But what you will learn is that there are things you can do and tools you can use to help you think, and there are just things you need to be alerted to. Your awareness needs to be raised that you need to think a certain way or think about a certain issue that will help you make informed decisions as to how to interpret something you're reading. That's our goal for the next few episodes of the podcast, and I hope you'll stay with us for that.