

LESSON TWO

Grasping God's Word

From their town to ours — how we cross the river between the Bible and today.

RIGHT NOW, SOMEWHERE...

Someone is reading this *book*.

ETHIOPIA

An old man sipping coffee,
reading David & Goliath in
Amharic.

BUENOS AIRES

A woman on a bus, reflecting
on Psalm 1.

35,000 FT

A Korean executive pondering
Romans 5 above the clouds.

SAN DIEGO

A college student, latte in
hand, finishing Mark 4.

AN HONEST TENSION

We love this book. It is also hard.

WE LOVE IT BECAUSE

- It is gripping — stories, exhortations, drama.
- It deals with the deepest things — God, death, love, eternity.
- We believe God speaks through it.

AND YET

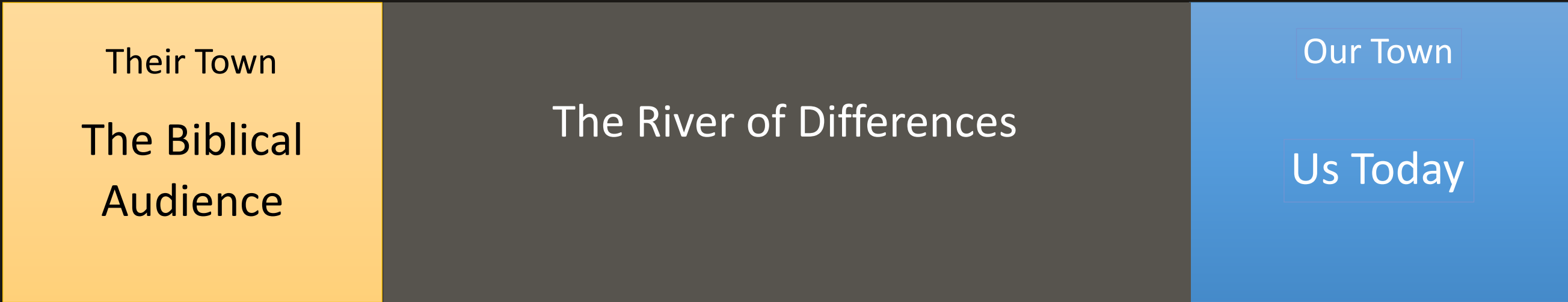
Some parts are easy. Much of it is not.

We want to dig deeper. We want to know we're getting the actual truth out of the text — not just making it up.

THE CENTRAL IMAGE

There is a river between us and the text.

How do we cross?



The Bible was written then. We live now. The distance is real.

WHAT SEPARATES US FROM THEM

Five currents in the river.

01 · CULTURE Customs <i>Robes, sandals, sacrifices, honor codes, household structures — not our world.</i>	02 · LANGUAGE Tongue <i>Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek — every word has crossed a translator's desk.</i>	03 · SITUATION Context <i>Specific people, specific problems — exile, persecution, dietary law — not ours.</i>	04 · TIME Distance <i>Two to thirty-five hundred years separate us from the page.</i>	05 · COVENANT Theology <i>They were under the law. We are under the new covenant in Christ.</i>
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The Old Testament widens the river. The covenant current is the strongest.

THE RIVER IN ACTION

What do we do with passages like these?

LEVITICUS 19:19

Two kinds of cloth.

"Nor shall you wear a garment of cloth made of two kinds of material."

So... only 100% cotton?

JUDGES 6:37

Gideon's fleece.

Gideon puts out a fleece to confirm what God has told him.

So... should we?

MATTHEW 14:29

Walking on water.

Peter steps out of the boat and walks toward Jesus.

So... should we try?

Even if we can't walk on water — how do we cross the river that separates us from the text?

COMMON — AND BROKEN

Three ways people try to cross.

APPROACH 01

Wade in blind.

The intuitive, "feels-right" method. If a verse seems to apply, apply it.

Sometimes the water is deeper than it looks.
You end up washed downstream.

APPROACH 02

Try to leap.

*Spiritualize the passage.
Turn every detail into a symbol and jump the gap.*

Ignores what the text actually says.
Lands in allegory — and still downstream.

APPROACH 03

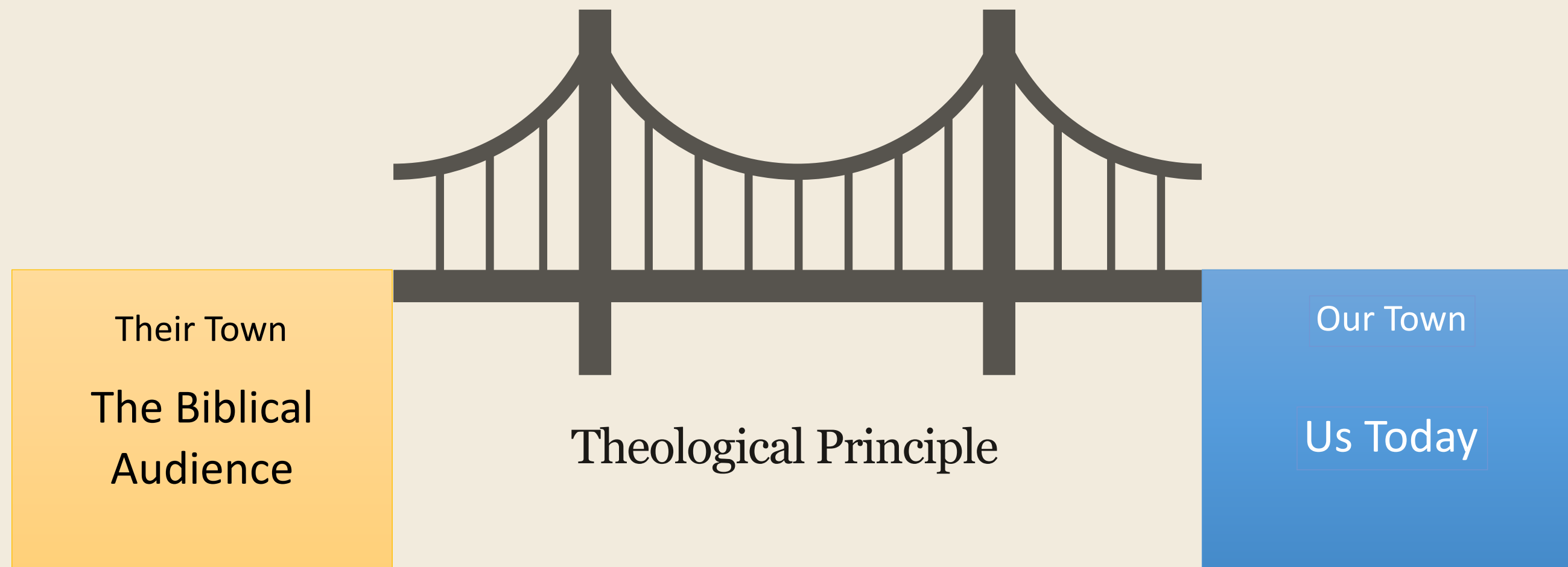
Skip it.

Shrug. Move on to passages that "speak to me." Ignore the hard ones.

You stay safely on your bank.
You never get the meaning at all.

THE WAY ACROSS

We build a bridge.



Every specific text expresses a universal principle. The principle belongs to all of God's people, in every time and place.

THE WHOLE MAP

Five steps across the river.

- 01 **Grasp the text in their town.** What did the text mean to the biblical audience?
- 02 **Measure the width of the river.** What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
- 03 **Cross the principlizing bridge.** What is the theological principle in this text?
- 04 **Consult the biblical map.** How does this principle fit with the rest of the Bible?
- 05 **Grasp the text in our town.** How should Christians today live out this theological principle?

STEP ONE

Grasp the text in *their town*.

THE QUESTION

What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

THE WORK

- Read carefully. Observe. Look, look, and look again.
- Study grammar, keywords, and historical context.
- Read what comes before and after the passage.
- Write one or two sentences using past-tense verbs to describe what it meant to the original audience
- Don't generalize yet.

STEP TWO

Measure the width of the *river*.

THE QUESTION

What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

SOMETIMES

It is a creek you can hop. Sometimes it is the Mississippi.

LOOK FOR

- Differences in culture, language, situation, time.
- For Old Testament passages: the covenant difference.
- What is unique about this audience's moment?

STEP THREE · THE LOAD-BEARING ONE

Cross the *principlizing* bridge.

THE QUESTION

What is the theological principle in this text?

THE WORK

- Revisit the differences (step 2). Then identify the similarities.
- What broader, timeless truth is this specific text expressing?
- This is the "theological message" of the passage.
- Write the principle in one or two sentences, using present-tense verbs

FIVE TESTS FOR A GOOD PRINCIPLE

How do we know we got it right?

- 01 **Reflected in the text.** Pulled from the passage, not imposed on it.
- 02 **Timeless.** Not tied to one specific situation.
- 03 **Not culturally bound.** True in every culture, not just theirs or ours.
- 04 **Corresponds with the rest of Scripture.** Confirmed by the wider biblical witness.
- 05 **Relevant to both audiences.** Speaks to the biblical reader and to us today.

STEP FOUR

Consult the biblical *map*.

THE QUESTION

How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?

THE WORK

- Test your principle against the whole of Scripture
- Does the rest of the Bible add insight, sharpen, or qualify it?
- For Old Testament texts — run it through the New Testament grid.
- We read the Old Testament as Christians, on this side of the cross

STEP FIVE

Grasp the text in *our town*.

THE QUESTION

How should individual Christians today live out this theological principle?

THE WORK

- One principle per passage — usually.
- Many possible applications — always.
- Apply to real life.
- Sometimes simply about *what* we believe.
- The journey ends in obedience, not in notes.

NOT JUST A CROSSING

The journey isn't a one-time crossing.

It's a spiral. You keep returning to the text, deeper each pass.



*We never exhaust the meaning. Sometimes we have to revisit — and revise —
what we thought we understood.*

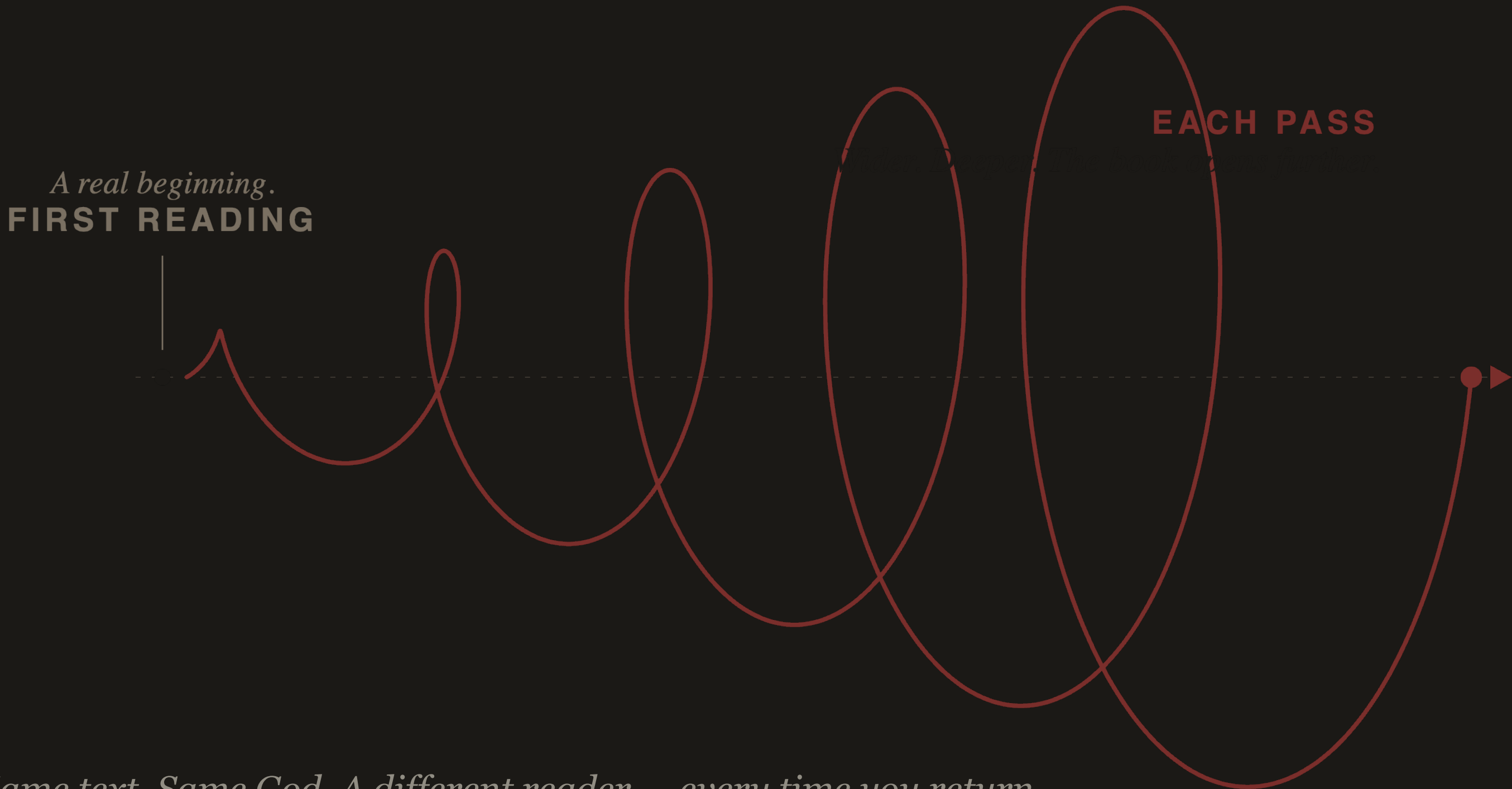
A SECOND VISIT

An illustration — Biltmore.



THE SHAPE IT ACTUALLY TAKES

Understanding grows as you keep going.



Same text. Same God. A different reader — every time you return.

JOSHUA 1:1–9 · ESV

Be strong and courageous.

¹ After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, ² "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. ³ Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. ⁴ From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. ⁵ No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. ⁶ Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. ⁷ Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. ⁸ This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

STEP ONE · THEIR TOWN

What did this mean to *them*?

The Lord commanded *Joshua* — the new leader of Israel — to draw strength and courage from God's empowering presence, to be obedient to the law of Moses, and to meditate on the law so that he would be successful in the conquest of the promised land.

Past tense. Specific. About them.

STEP TWO · WIDTH OF THE RIVER

What's different between us and them?

We are *not* the political leaders of national Israel. (Though some of us lead in the church.)

We are *not* embarking on the conquest of Canaan.

We are *not* under the old covenant of the law.

Three significant differences. The river is wide here.

STEP THREE · THE BRIDGE

What's the timeless principle?

To be effective in serving God and successful in the task to which he has called us, we must draw strength and courage from his presence. We must also be obedient to God's Word, meditating on it constantly.

Present tense. Timeless. Speaks to Joshua's situation — and to ours.

FROM PRINCIPLE TO PRACTICE

Map and town.

STEP 04 · THE MAP

- The whole Bible affirms that God's people draw strength from his presence.
- In the New Testament, God's presence comes through the indwelling Holy Spirit — not the tabernacle.
- Both Testaments call God's people to attend closely to his Word.

STEP 05 · OUR TOWN

- Meditate on Scripture — read consistently, listen to good teaching, study God's Word.
- Called to something scary? (New ministry, hard conversation, teaching the kids.) Be strengthened by his presence; stay rooted in the Word.
- If you lead, recognize what courage requires and where it has to come from.

IN ONE BREATH

Read it. *Measure* the distance. Find the principle. *Check* it. Then live it.

The journey starts with a careful reading and ends with a changed life.
There are no shortcuts. The reward is great.

Discussion.

01

Have you ever tried to apply a confusing passage directly — and gotten burned? What happened?

02

Which of the five currents in the river — culture, language, situation, time, covenant — feels widest for you when you read the Bible?

03

Which of the three failed approaches (intuitive, spiritualizing, ignoring) do you find yourself reaching for most often? Why?

TAKE IT HOME

This week's homework.

01 Answer questions in the handout/book.

NEXT LESSON

Getting a lay of the *land*.

Seeing the forest before the trees

THANK YOU · SEE YOU NEXT WEEK