

Bite Size Bible Study

How Nimble is your Brain? #214

By Pastor Lee

Are you a concrete thinker or an abstract thinker?

Concrete thinkers view things at face value, using what they can see, hear, smell, or touch, but they don't typically connect it to other situations. If you're a concrete thinker, you might be good at analyzing the physical properties of something, but you would probably miss a wider understanding of the object. Concrete thinking focuses on the physical world and emphasizes facts.

Abstract thinkers are all about going deeper, generalizing, classify objects and experiences. They excel at generalizing, so that the concept can be manipulated in their head and used in conjunction with other concepts. They use their imagination to see beyond the surface level of things. Abstract thinking involves thinking about concepts in general terms.

Greek thought (the general way Westerners think) view the world through the mind (abstract thought) ancient Hebrew thought views the world through the senses (concrete thought).

Examples

Concrete thought is the expression of concepts and ideas in ways that can be seen, touched, smelled, tasted, and/or heard. All five of the senses are used when speaking, hearing, writing, reading, in the Hebrew language. An example of this can be found in Psalms 1:3; "He is like a *tree* planted by *the streams of water*, which yields its *fruit* in season and whose *leaf* does not *wither*". In this passage the author expresses his thoughts in concrete terms like; *tree, streams of water, fruit, and leaf*.

Abstract thought is the expression of concepts and ideas in ways that cannot be seen touched smelled tasted or heard. Abstract thought is a foreign concept to the ancient Hebrew mind. Examples of abstract thought can be found in Psalms 103:8; "The Lord is *compassionate* and *gracious*, slow to *anger*, abounding ". The words *compassion, grace, anger, and love*; are all abstract words. Ideas that cannot be experienced by the senses.

Why do we find these abstract words in a passage of concrete thinking Hebrews? Actually, these are abstract English words used to translate the original Hebrew concrete words. The translators often translate this way because of the original Hebrew makes no sense when literally translated into English

Using Both

Both types of thinking are useful, depending on the situation, but having a good balance of both can help us approach problems from different angles and come up with creative solutions.

We in the 21st Century Western World often think and reason scripture from the abstract angle. We try to generalize a scripture to extend it beyond the concrete meaning it was written in. Most of the scriptures were written in a totally different culture and time, when thinking for the general population was concrete thinking.

It is generally thought that abstract thinking began with the Greek culture. Before that most, if not all, cultures were generally concrete thinkers. Knowing that, as we read the scriptures, we must be able switch our brains between thinking abstractly as a Greek sometimes and concretely as a Hebrew at other times, (In the New Testament times, Greek thought was filtering into the thinking of many cultures.)

Think about Jesus' Parables. We often see that He based His reasoning on experience rather than if-then-logic. He frequently used observations of natural objects to explain spiritual matters, like: *Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?* This seems to fit both our way of thinking as well as the first century Jewish thinking.

However, when He says:

"Consider how the wildflowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

When we read this, we might do a double take, shake our heads and think what does He mean by that? Is he speaking concretely or abstractly? Maybe both!

Jesus often used examples based on human experience to explain the complexity of God's ways. A farmer finds tares growing in his wheat fields. Wouldn't it be logical to pull them out? But if we know that the wheat crop would be damaged in the process, the farmer instead decides to let the tares grow (Concrete Thinking). In the same way, God allows evildoers to live alongside the righteous. (Abstract Thinking)

Jesus taught theology through storytelling. He was addressing a mystery that had confused people throughout history. "How can a good God let evil seemingly go unchecked?"

Jesus's answer was to share a parallel situation, an experience where a farmer would make his decision based on concrete logic. God knows the wider situation and, for the ultimate good, puts off judgment until the end. Only abstract thinking allows someone to take the concrete example and generalize it to an understanding of the connection between the farmers response and God's response.

Consider this teaching of Jesus in John 6.

Jesus the Bread of Life

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."

At this the Jews there began to grumble about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"

He tells the crowd that He is the Bread of Life and that eating his flesh is the only way to eternal life. They didn't like what He was saying, it was unpalatable to their concrete understanding. During this period in Jewish

history only a very few people were educated enough to be able to think abstractly. Most people were concrete thinkers. Even the Hebrew language is based on concrete words and phrases.

Those few who had learned abstract thinking were generally the ones that were supposed to guide the masses, and generally they were the prophets and priests and kings.

I believe that was what Jesus was talking about when the disciples asked why He spoke in parables:

He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them."

This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

Matthew 13:11,13 NIV

The path from the concrete image of bread to Jesus being the Bread of Life is not a single step. Bread was the essential food for physical life to exist. One had to eat or die. Jesus said that He was the Bread of Life and by Him being the sustenance for eternal life we must ingest His life-giving essence. This easily escapes the concrete thinker.

The general audiences Jesus spoke to, generally understood by concrete thinking. The general population had not yet developed a way of understanding abstract thought. The elite, well educated, had the advantage of abstract thinking to draw on. Thus, the leap from concrete to abstract generally eluded the less educated.

Jesus did sophisticated theology in a very Hebraic way, using concrete, picturesque metaphors to develop his point. But only those who could have and should have understood the deeper meaning of those metaphors would be able to see beyond the concrete message to the spiritual message. That message being the eternal life-giving message.

"Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

***let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance—
for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.***

Proverbs 1:5-6 NIV

References:
Reading the Bible with Rabbi Jesus by Lois Tverberg
Ancient Hebrew Language and Alphabet by Jeff Benner