

Basic Bible Interpretation: The Importance of Context in Understanding Bible Language

What Does the Context Include?

- It is important to understand what is meant by "context" when using it to interpret a passage of Scripture. The context of a passage includes all of the following things:
 1. The verses immediately before and after the passage.
 2. The paragraph and book in which the passage appears.
 3. Other books by this author, as well as the overall message of the entire Bible.
 4. The cultural environment of the time when the passage was written.
 5. The historical period (*dispensation*) of "Progressive Revelation" during which the passage was written.

The Immediate Context of a Passage

- Context is important because it forces the interpreter to examine the biblical writer's overall flow of thought. The meaning of any passage is nearly always *determined, controlled, or limited* by what appears immediately beforehand and afterward in the text.
- "By observing what precedes and what follows a passage, the interpreter has greater opportunity to see what the writer was seeking to convey to his original readers. These readers did not plunge into the middle of the letter and seize out a few consecutive sentences. They read carefully the whole document. To treat material fairly the modern interpreter must enter into the total train of thought. No axiom is better known and more frequently disobeyed than the oft quoted: '*A text without a context is just a pretext.*' Faithful adherence to context will create in the interpreter a genuine appreciation for the authority of Scripture."¹ A respect for the authority of Scripture means that we will seek its meaning rather than putting ourselves in authority *above* Scripture as the determiner of its meaning.
- We all have a tendency to take verses out of context and use them to support points that we think are important. This is called "proof-texting" -- and it is our own attempt to make the Bible say what we want it to say, rather than letting the text of Scripture say what God intended to communicate. "The most common failure in interpretation is to violate this most simple and basic principle: *the context must control.*"²

Examples of Interpreting in Context

- Galatians 5:4 -- Does "*Falling from grace*" mean that a person can lose his salvation? In the context of this passage, the apostle Paul was discussing the legalistic "Circumcision Party" and their attempt to bring the believers under the bondage of the Mosaic Law. He warned these believers that if a person seeks justification by God through human effort in obeying the Law, then he has rejected the way of salvation that God provided through the gracious gift of His Son -- he has departed from the way of grace, or is "*fallen from grace.*"
- 1 Corinthians 7:1 -- "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." Does this mean that there should be no physical contact whatsoever between men and women? In what sense is a man not to "touch" a woman? This passage occurs in the context of the importance of abstaining from sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:1-5; 6:9-20; 7:2, 9), and that is the sense in which a man is not to touch a woman. It would be wrong to conclude that any man should never touch any woman, but sexual purity should be the goal for every man and woman.
- 2 Thessalonians 2:7 -- "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way." Who is the one who restrains lawlessness? Unfortunately, the apostle Paul never directly identified the restrainer, but he assumed that the Thessalonians knew (based on his previous teaching: see 2 Thess 2:5, 15). Our study of the context of this passage indicates that whoever the restrainer is (1) he must have actively existed from the time of Paul through the period of history until the "*man of lawlessness*" [Antichrist] will be revealed; (2) he must have the authority to dictate, control, and direct human actions and events; (3) he must be powerful enough to hold back mighty spiritual forces -- even those of Satan himself -- see 2 Thess 2:9; (4) he must be able to hold back lawlessness everywhere at once on a global scale; and (5) he must maintain or uphold the

standard of absolute holiness during this time period. The only plausible candidate who meets all of these requirements is God the Holy Spirit (especially through his unique ministry during the Church Age).

- 1 John 3:6-10 -- "No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him." Does this mean that, in order to maintain his status as a Christian, a believer must never sin? In the context of the *entire book* of First John this interpretation would be incorrect, because John clearly states that Christians do sin (see 1 John 1:8, 10; 2:1; 5:16), and that believers have a remedy when that occurs (see 1 John 1:9). Therefore, we must seek another interpretation of 1 John 3:6-10 that is more consistent with the context of the entire message of the book.

Understanding the Overall Flow of Thought

- The purpose of the biblical writer will influence the meaning of every passage in the book. Understanding the writer's general purpose will provide a larger context for each specific passage, and this will help to determine the author's intended meaning. We should allow his purpose to control our interpretation. A basic rule is that each passage should be interpreted in light of the overall purpose of the biblical writer.
 - An isolated passage cannot be interpreted as if it were disconnected from all of the ideas that come before and afterward. Outlines are very helpful in discerning the overall plan of a book. In order to identify and outline the flow of thought, it is important to look for changes or transitions in the text. The biblical writers normally present their messages in recognizable steps. To understand these steps, we must look at the structure and flow of the larger context. Changes in the text may provide clues to the structure of a writer's thoughts. For example:
 - The author may clearly announce a new section as he begins it.
 - 1. There may be significant "signposts" in the text. For example, in 1 Corinthians 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 12:1; and 16:1 we see the transition words: "*Now concerning.*"
 - 2. There may be a change in literary form, for example from prose to poetry.
 - 3. There may be grammatical changes in person, number, tense, voice, or mood.
 - 4. There may be obvious changes in subject matter, logic, or thought patterns.
- The author may use regular repetition. He may compare or contrast things consistently. He may write in sequence from cause to effect (or effect to cause).
 - "It is important to seek an understanding of the purpose through direct reading of the book before consulting the opinions of others. But it would be a mistake to make a final decision without consulting what specialists have concluded. If a Bible introduction book, a Bible handbook, and the introduction of the biblical book in one or two commentaries all concur as to what the purpose is, one can proceed with some confidence on that basis as he studies the book. If there is no general agreement among the specialists, it is probably because no particular purpose is altogether clear. In that case, no purpose should be used as a guideline for interpreting a specific passage, except in a general way."³
 - A study of the larger context of a Scripture passage usually shows why the author wrote to his readers the way he did. "As we understand the purpose of the original writer, we are deterred from attaching ideas to his writings that are completely foreign to his purpose or development of thought."⁴ Our goal should always be to determine the intended meaning of the biblical author, rather than a meaning we impose on the text.

Scripture Interprets Scripture

- The best commentary on the Bible is the *Bible* !
- Sometimes parallel passages in other Bible books can shed light on the meaning of a passage which is obscure in its immediate context. When we say that a passage is parallel it may be a direct verbal parallel with similar words and phrases, or it may be a conceptual parallel where a similar idea is expressed in different words. For example, parallels exist between parts of 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles, between parts of Galatians and Romans, between parts of Ephesians and Colossians, parts of 2 Peter and Jude, as well as between parts of Daniel and Revelation.
- Cross-reference resources can help locate other passages that speak about the same idea or event. But we should not assume that such reference materials are on the same level with the inspired Word of God. "Marginal

references in various Bibles are famous (or infamous) for providing other materials which have a real or supposed bearing on the passage being studied. While these should be used, they should also be critically evaluated to see whether the citation is an actual parallel, merely a chance resemblance, or an apparent resemblance without true similarity of thought pattern."⁵ As responsible interpreters of the Word of God, we should carefully evaluate parallel passages to see whether they help us determine the author's intended meaning for the text we are studying.

- Guidelines for using Scripture to interpret Scripture:

1. An obscure or ambiguous text should never be interpreted in such a way as to contradict the teaching of a plain or clear passage. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:29 the words "baptized for the dead" should not be interpreted to mean that substitutionary baptism can somehow bring salvation to a person who has already died. This would contradict the plain teaching of many other passages in Scripture.
2. A complicated or complex interpretation should not be given preference over a simple or more natural explanation. For example, in Matthew 16:28 when Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom," He was obviously not referring to the Millennial Kingdom because all those present would die before that time. A simpler explanation is that He was referring to the foretaste of His kingdom which was experienced six days later on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-13).

A Final Challenge

- We must not ignore the context when interpreting a passage of Scripture:

"It is a shameful thing to carelessly ignore the context. To deliberately violate the context is more than shameful; it is sinful, for it is a deliberate substitution of one's own words for the Word of God. The student of Scripture, though he may not understand the original languages, nevertheless has at his command the single most important tool -- the context. Let him use it diligently!"⁶

Resource List for Understanding the Context of a Passage

Ranked in order beginning with the least complicated and least costly resources in each category.

Bible Handbooks

Bible Handbooks provide outlines and overviews of every book in the Bible.

1. Halley's Bible Handbook
2. New Unger's Bible Handbook
3. MacArthur's Bible Handbook
4. Larry Richards, The Illustrated Bible Handbook
5. Willmington's Bible Handbook and Willmington's Guide to the Bible
6. Book introductions and outlines in Study Bibles, Reference Bibles, or commentaries.

Bible Surveys

Bible Surveys provide helpful overviews of the entire Word of God.

1. Henrietta Mears, What the Bible is All About
2. Bruce Wilkinson and Ken Boa, Talk Thru the Bible
3. Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament and Jensen's Survey of the New Testament
4. Bryan Beyer and Bill Arnold, Encountering the Old Testament and Walter Elwell, Encountering the New Testament
5. Paul Benware, Survey of the Old Testament and Survey of the New Testament
6. Robert Gundry, Survey of the New Testament
7. Merrill Tenney, New Testament Survey

Comparing Scripture with Scripture

Topical indexes and cross-reference resources provide ways to locate parallel passages in Scripture.

1. Nave's Topical Bible
2. The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge
3. Topical Index of the Bible
4. Harmony of the Gospels
5. Marginal cross-reference systems in Study or Reference Bibles.

Endnotes

- ¹ A. Berkeley Michelsen, Interpreting the Bible, 104, 113.
- ² Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, 163.
- ³ McQuilkin, 156.
- ⁴ Michelsen, 105.
- ⁵ Michelsen, 100.
- ⁶ McQuilkin, 164.

Copyright © 2006 Some Rights Reserved by Steve Lewis
This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/).