

How to Study the Bible

Week Three

February 15, 2009

Interpretation: Context

*Elisha prayed, and said,
"LORD, I pray, open his
eyes that he may see."
(2 Kings 6:17)*



*His delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day
and night. He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That
brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And
whatever he does shall prosper. (Ps 1:2-3)*


Calvary Chapel
OF ROSWELL

Review

This is now our third class and booklet on Bible study! So far, we have discovered that real Bible Study always consists of three key aspects: **Observation**, **Interpretation**, and **Application**. Our goal is to become adept at specifically focusing on each of these three in our Bible studies.

In our first study, we saw the vital place of making good **Observations**. Without good observations, we will not be able to go very far or deep in our Bible Study. My prayer to God is to continue to teach you and grow you in your observation skills. If you struggle with this, please go back and review the first booklet for some practical helps and tools in making observations.



Last week, we began to consider the second part of Bible study—**Interpretation**. In this portion of our Bible study, we seek to take the observations we've made and figure out what they and more importantly, what the passage we are studying means. This section of Bible study is the most technical...and yet so necessary. We have divided up our Interpretation into five basic areas of interpretation: Content, Context, Christ, Compare and Consult.



In our last study, we began to focus on the first aspect of **Interpretation**, which is Content. The idea here is to focus on figuring out and defining the content in the verse you are studying. One of the primary aspects of this part is defining the words in the verse or verses you are studying. We looked at a bunch of excellent tools available to us in this modern age. I hope that you are growing in the use of the tools available to you. If you have questions on this, please ask, as this is a vital area.



Today...lets continue learning some of the tools of **Interpretation** and consider the second aspect—Context!

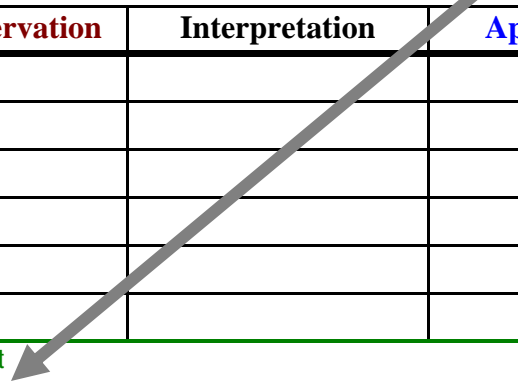
Interpretation: Context

In this section, we want to continue focusing on how to rightly interpret the Bible. As a reminder, we are using five “C” words to help us remember each area of interpretation.

- C ontent
- C ontext
- C hrist
- C ompare
- C onsuit

Practically, I am asking you to try the “Chart” method of Bible study (see booklet Two for more details). Probably the easiest way to do this is to add four long boxes at the bottom of the chart you are using. If you are studying a section that is longer than a verse, I would advise you to make a separate chart for each verse. Thus, for each verse you would have the chart that has a place for your observations, studying the words—and at the bottom a place to look at Context, Christ, Compare and Consult. See below:

Observation	Interpretation	Application
Context		
Christ		
Compare		
Consult		



Where does this fit?

Just so this is not too confusing, let's imagine we are studying a verse, what would our progress look like so far?

- 1st–Observations** – we would have made all, or as many as possible of our observations first, noting them in the left column of our chart.
- 2nd–Interpretation:Content.** We would have begun our interpretation process by seeking to define and note the individual words we observed in our verse.
- 3rd–Interpretation:Context.** Continuing our interpretation, we would now focus on the context of the verse.

Now – please don't misunderstand me – this is not to say that you cannot ever vary the stages of your Bible study, you can. It is possible in your early observations, you noted some details about context, surely you can right those down as you see them. And it is likely that you might add to your observations later in your study—which is good. This is not a slavish process that has to be strictly followed. Instead these tools and methods are meant to be a help and a guide—not a binding requirement.

Our hope is that by using the Chart method, and placing boxes for each area—including what we are focusing on today—context—we will make sure to cover all the details we need to in our study. I truly do hope you find this all helpful in your study!



What is Context?

Interpreting a passage by its context is one of the most vital and sadly most missed of keys of Bible study. To be a good student of the Bible, you must learn to focus on the context of the section you are studying. Keeping an eye on context will keep you from many errors and rescue you from many wrong things that people teach.



What is context? Well, every word in the Bible is part of a verse, and every verse is part of a sentence, and every sentence is part of a paragraph, and every paragraph is part of a chapter and every chapter part of a book. That is context! Understanding a verse in its context keeps us from misunderstanding what a verse is saying.

In simple way – that makes sense does it not? Perhaps it has happened to you, someone has heard you or walked in on a conversation and gotten the entirely wrong idea of what you were saying, because they did not have the whole



context of the conversation. That is the same way as just picking a verse out of its context. It is like walking into a middle of conversation in the Bible but not knowing the subject matter or the flow of the discussion.

Yet this is exactly what many people do with the Bible. They study in a “hunt and peck method”, where they take verses out of its context, to mean something to them. They find favorite or special verses—and seek to yank them out of any sense of the context it was given in.



The most famous example of this is the hypothetical man who wanted to find God's will for his life. But He didn't know where in the Bible to look, so he just opened the Bible and pointed to any verse, trusting God to lead him. He looked and it said, "*Judas went out and hanged himself.*" This made him a little uneasy, so he decided to try again. The next verse he pointed to said, "*Go thou and do likewise.*" Really worried this time, he decided to go for two out of three. The third verse he pointed to said, "*What you are going to do, do quickly.*" Needless to say, this was not the intended interpretation of those verses!

Context Needed!

Probably the easiest way to show how important context is can be seen in some examples of how it is done poorly, or incorrectly.

Example #1

1 Cor. 8:5b: "as there are many gods and many lords"

So from this verse we can conclude that there are many gods right? Polytheism reigns and there is a multitude of gods out there to choose from, right? WRONG! That is not true! That is not what the passage is stating!

Yet, believe it or not, there are people who are seeking to use this verse to teach exactly such a concept!

But the context clearly shows us that is not what is being said. In the passage just before it, it states "there is no other God, but One". In chapter 10, verses 19-20 – Paul will further tell us that all idols that represent false gods, are actually backed and purported by demons. They are not gods at all!

Example #2

Lets do a more famous one, that is most often used incorrectly.

For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Mt 18:20)

This verse is constantly quoted in prayer meetings and especially small prayer meetings as a means of encouragement. Yet is that the real meaning of this passage? Is this passage teaching that if only a few people are together praying, that God is with them in there prayer meeting? If so, is it saying when we pray by ourselves, without "two or three" God is not there? Absolutely not!

This passage has nothing to do with prayer, it is not even about prayer! Yet again, it is stated this way so often, that few would really know what the verse is actually talking about.

The whole context of this verse is church discipline! It is telling us, when we rightly, with proof and support of two or three witnesses,

deal with sin, then God is with us as we deal with it! It is a passage about the authority we have to deal with sin, it is communicating nothing about a prayer meeting! In fact, if taking literally, it is inaccurately teaching us that we need to be with at least one other person to be in God's presence when we pray.

Example # 3

Here we examine the latter part of 2 Peter 3:9, commonly quoted as:

"...[The Lord is] not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

Some are using this verse as a proof for their idea that everyone is saved! Is that what it is saying? NO!

The context is explaining why God is waiting so long before coming, because He desires to give more the opportunity to be saved! In fact, the entire context of this chapter and chapter two is about God coming to judge mankind! It is not teaching universal salvation.

I could give multitudes of examples of this, from all over the Bible. Honestly, it is the most abused way people teach the scripture, taking it out of context and making it say what it was never meant to say. Many confusing verses, are not nearly so confusing when you look at the context they are given in.

A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE NOW GOING
BACK TO CHURCH ONCE AGAIN



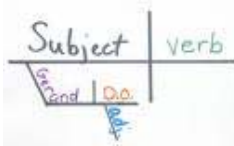
THIS IS USUALLY BECAUSE THEY
HAVE FORGOTTEN SOMETHING LIKE
THEIR KEYS OR JACKET OR GLASSES

How do we study a passage in its context?

First – read the verses around it! The verses before and after the verse you are studying. Look to see the context of them. Especially seek to follow the train of thought through them.

Second—identify the sentence and paragraph the verse is in.

Many verses in the Bible cover only part of a sentence. It is important to look and discover the whole sentence and the flow of the sentence. Honestly, you could go a long way with this. Some even diagram a sentence, much like we learned back in high school! If that works for you, great. If not, you might not have to go that far—but just seeing the basic flow of a sentence is helpful. Ask questions like who is the subject, where is the verb and such things.



Third – seek to understand how it fits in its chapter and book.

It is helpful to seek and gain an understanding of the entire purpose of a book of the Bible. Most books have a main aim or purpose. Seeing that and how your verse fits in—is helpful. Having a good understanding of the basic flow of a book and the flow of the chapters is also helpful. The best way to do this is in your own study. But there are also good books—Bible hand books and more than can help you with this.

Four—Outlining. Outlining is a tool that in many ways covers the previous three points of context, at least in part. Understand this about outlining, there is no master way of doing it or a “right” way of doing this. For some, outlining is intimidating, because they just “feel” that they are doing it wrong. Yet, if you would look at a dozen commentaries on any book or passage on the Bible that has outlines, you will notice that they all handle it quite differently. So, don’t pressure yourself to outline the way I do or others do.

I want to encourage you to work at this, to learn to outline in a way that is consistent with the way that you think—yet helps you to see the flow of the passage in front of you. This is the aim—a good outline helps us follow the train of thought through a passage or section.

In a moment, I want to give you a couple of helps to make your own outline, but I want to also say this here. Even if you make your own outline, it is helpful to look at other outlines of the passage. If you have a study Bible, almost all of them have a outline of the book which would be good to look at. Most commentaries have an outline of the book. As you will notice, everyone has a different style of outlining, and that is fine! The key is to, seek to see the flow of thought...so that you can see the context.

For example, here are some outlines of 1 Peter chapter one that I copied from various sources:

THE BELIEVER'S PRIVILEGES AND DUTIES (1:1-2:10)

- A. Salutation (1:1, 2)
 - B. His Position as a Believer (1:3-12)
 - C. His Conduct in the Light of His Position (1:13-2:3)
-

Introduction (1:1, 2).

- I. Christ and the Trial of Faith (1:3-25).
 - A. The Inheritance of Faith (1:3-12).
 - B. The Response of Faith (1:13-17).
 - C. The Birth of Faith (1:18-25).
-

I. GOD'S GRACE AND SALVATION—1:1-2:10

- A. Live in hope—1:1-12
 - B. Live in holiness—1:13-21
 - C. Live in harmony—1:22-2:10
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Obviously, if you are looking at these above, people have different way of breaking a passage apart. Yet, there is still a general idea of the flow of thought.

Basics of outlining

Ok, lets begin again with the key of noticing sentences and paragraphs. These can and should figure into some of your outlining thoughts.

Many sentences in the Bible stretch over several verses, and you may not choose to study a whole sentence...but you need to see the verse you are looking at in light of the whole sentence!

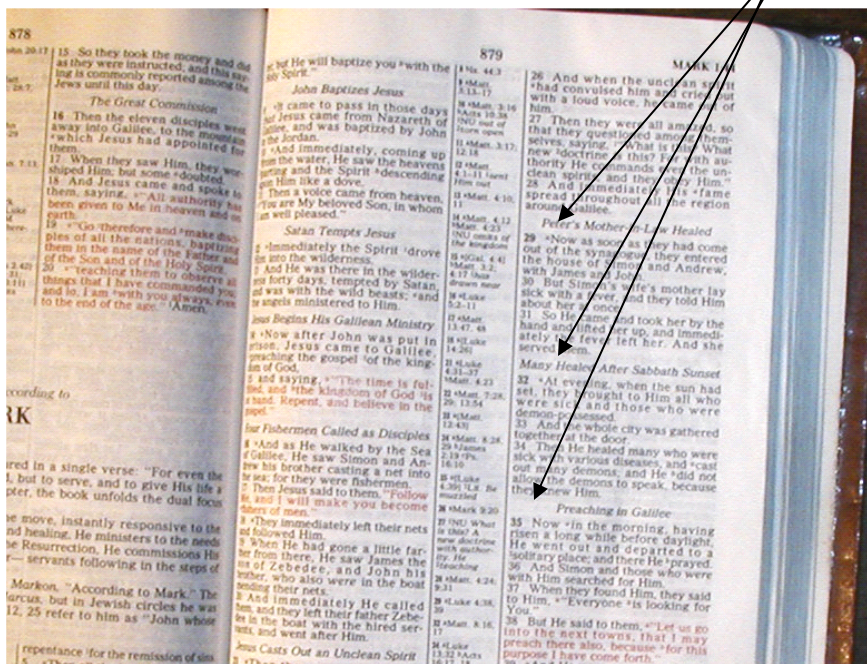
A word of warning though if you are using a dynamic equivalent translation of the Bible, for example the NIV translation. (*For more details on that, see booklet one about translations.*) In order to make the passages more user friendly to the modern mind – the translators changed the sentence and paragraph structures of the passages. What was one sentence in the original Greek or Hebrew Bible, might now be two or three sentences in the NIV translation.

Part of the reason for this is, that often sentences in the Bible are quite long, and have dangling phrase after phrase in them which is not the normal English way of speaking. Breaking the sentence apart might be helpful to our ears...but perhaps obviously, dangerous to missing the flow of thought and the context God was communicating originally in a passage. Lets look at an example of this in 1 Peter:

NKJV-1 Peter 1:6-9 broken by sentences	NIV -1 Peter 1:6-9 broken by sentences
<p>In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ whom having not seen you love.</p>	<p>In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.</p>
	<p>These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.</p>
<p>Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.</p>	<p>Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.</p>

Therefore using an accurate translation, one that keeps the sentence and paragraph structure is important. Seeing the sentence in its entirety is often a key, because sometimes seeing that a verse is still a part of a longer sentence, will help you understand what is trying to be said. So – the easiest thing for me to challenge you to do – is in a word-for-word translation, look at the sentence structure – see where it starts and stops.

One step beyond this, is also to look at the paragraphs. Again, a word-for-word translation is needed to keep to a literal understanding. Now, in most word for word translations, they have tried to help you with this in several ways. Often, they will seek to break it into paragraphs for you. Other Bibles that are not in paragraph form will darken a verse number more than those around it to show the beginning of a paragraph. Here is a picture of a page from a Bible to show you what I mean- notice the darker verse numbers, indicating the beginning of a paragraph.



Now the goal, having a little sense of the sentence and paragraph structure is to outline the flow of thought in the passages around the verse you are considering.

How you do this, will be different—yet vital to track the flow of thought. I want to challenge you to just start trying this and it will be a skill that you grow in.

Hopefully these few keys will help you, but you will be saved, if you just try to remember that each passage has a context! Don't just grab a verse without understanding the context around it.

As you begin outlining, you can note the main purpose of the sentence you are studying, then the paragraph. Then add the paragraphs before and after.

Context in Conclusion

So many misunderstandings happen in life, because we neglect this understanding. How much even relationships would be better off, if when we hear that someone said something, if we went back to them – and asked them if that is what they really meant. To ask them what the context was of what they said.

In a similar way, God is the author of the Bible. As we seek the context, can I again say to ask the Holy Spirit to show you what the context is of His verses.

I pray God will give you clarity of understanding in this!

Homework

(For Sunday March 1st. We will not have class next week!)

- 1) Outline Romans 12.
- 2) Outline Mark 4.
- 3) In your own quiet time, seek to outline at least one verse a day.



