

Context is King **06-30-19**

If you want to be a Bible student, you need to understand above all else (except inspiration) the importance of context. Context refers to the purpose and intent of any communication. We use it every day to understand everything we know. One of the most common problems in Bible study is the failure to appreciate context. For example, in Psalm 14:1 the Psalmist states "there is no God". This passage has no value without context; indeed, without context it communicates the opposite of its intention. What is the context? Things a fool says in his heart.

Without a proper understanding of the importance of context we are unclear of literal or figurative language; we are not able to apply authority or use authority. Ultimately, if we fail to properly handle context we cannot understand God. Understanding the concept of context is perhaps the most important principle of a Bible student after understanding the supernatural nature of the Bible.

There are four types of context we need to apply to any statement in the Bible. First, there is the covenant context (the Old and New Testament). Second there is the letter or book context (what was the purpose of the book you are reading). Third there is the sectional context (what is the subject and intent of the area of the book you are reading). Finally, there is immediate context; what is the verse or verses trying to say.

First let us consider the importance of the **Covenant Context**. Hebrews 8:6 tells us that there is a New Covenant in Christ. That means the things of the Old Covenant (as a reminder, covenant and testament are synonyms; we are talking about the Old Testament) have passed away. We must rightly divide this distinction in order to have discernment (2 Timothy 2:15). How do we make this distinction? Scriptures make clear where this line is drawn: at the death of Christ (Hebrews 9:15). There is an importance caveat to that line; the things Jesus taught before His death are brought forward into the New Covenant as the doctrine of Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).

Understanding this distinction of covenants is of vital importance to understanding the will of God for us today. Consider that the promises to Israel are not the same as those to Christians. Some may look at an event like the death of the thief on the cross in Luke 23:42-43 and see a pattern for us; but was that event before or after the death of Christ? Being beforehand, we know that it is part of the first covenant, not the covenant of Christ. Conversely, when Peter commanded repentance and baptism in Acts 2:38, was that to the benefactors of the Old Covenant or the new one? Being after Christ's death, we can see it is for us. When someone wants to determine what music God desires from us in worship, do they turn to Psalm 147:7 or Ephesians 5:19? If they want to determine how to deal with an adulterer among them, do they turn to Leviticus 20:10 or 1 Corinthians 5:11? In these places, context **MUST** be king.

Second, we need to understand the **Letter or Book Context**. Many books tell us the purpose of the letter; John 20:30-31 tells us why John wrote the Gospel of John; John tells us his purpose and intent for 1 John in 1 John 5:13. Luke explains his purpose in preparing a chronological gospel in Luke 1:1-4. It is important to understand that some authors tell us the purpose, and some leave us enough information to determine it (such as in Matthew or Hebrews). Different contexts by the genre of the book: Proverbs is a book of truisms and lawful mindsets; Psalms is a book of poetry and prophecy; James is an epistle and book of law.

There is a great danger in mishandling the bible if we lose the context of a book. For example, Revelation 1:1 tells us that the context of the book is “things which must soon take place”. Can we see many ignore that context and apply the prophecies to our own times? Can we see that ignoring context results in a completely false interpretation of Scriptures?

Third, there is something we will call a **Sectional Context**. By this we make the observation that within many books are collective passages (sometimes they are broken into chapters and verses, but these are man-made inventions and do not always accurately break apart sections by context). An example is found in Galatians 6:1-10. There Paul discusses things that we do for one another, and things we do for ourselves in Christ. We bear our own burden; the context of the final statement (to do good to all) is not a command to the church but a command to individual Christians. This distinction is important, as failing to grasp context has resulted in many applying an authority to the church that is not present (to provide aid to non-believers).

There are many such conversations in a general context that have been misunderstood when taken from their context. Ephesians 1:3-11 discusses the concept of predestination; the context is that the church was predestined to be saved, but some have removed the term from context and teach that we are individually predestined to salvation. 1 Corinthians 15:12-29 mentions a baptism for the dead; out of context some have forced this to mean we are baptized for others who are dead; in the context it clearly refers to our own baptism and hope of eternal life. There are many times where large parts of letters/books are contextualized by statements; Paul declares that 1 Corinthians 11:17-19 is about the assembly of the church for communion; Paul declares 1 Corinthians 7 is about marriage. These statements help us to grasp the context of statements made subsequent to them.

Finally, there is the **Immediate Context** of a verse. Often this refers to the verse itself (such as Psalm 14:1) or the verses immediately before or after it. For example Ephesians 2:8-11 begins with a statement that we are not saved by works. But a few verses later Paul clarified this by describing the works of the Law of Moses. Indeed, most times Paul mentions works not effecting salvation he mentions within a few passages the works of the Law of Moses. Verses are often taken out of immediate context. Many point to Matthew 7:1 and declare we “don’t judge”, when the immediate verses afterwards describe how we are expected to make wise judgments. Someone points to Romans 3:23 and declares that everyone is born in sin, but they miss that the “everyone” in the context of the statement refers to the Jew and the Gentile. Many false ideas are refuted instantly when the immediate context is examined; sometimes it occurred within the same verse.

Context has two enemies: the preconceived notion and the ignorant mind. When one has a predetermined view to find, they wage war on context, seeking passages to confirm their pre-conceived knowledge. Second, when one has a lack of knowledge of the text, they cannot find the context. If they do not know what else is written, they cannot understand what is written. This is the meaning of Peter’s statement in 2 Peter 3:16: *As also in all (Paul’s) epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.*

If you want to understand the Bible, you must submit to Context as KING. You must understand that context rules (authorizes) the passages, and must be considered first in study. You cannot ignore context and understand God’s message to you.