

All About the Context!

Thus far in our studies, we have been thinking about foundational principles for studying the scriptures. As we move forward, we will be focusing on more specific principles for studying scripture. We will begin to think about how to look at specific passages, and draw reasonable conclusions from them. What does God want us to understand from a given passage? To begin examining this idea, we must realize that every passage is found within a context, and that context has great bearing on how we are to understand what has been written.

There is no vacuum...

Nothing in scripture was written in a vacuum. It was written for a purpose, and to particular people. It is unreasonable to pull a single verse, or group of verses from a passage and interpret their meaning outside of the context that it/they are found in. This is, perhaps, the greatest barrier to understanding God's revelation properly. Far too many people want to pick and choose what they like from the scriptures, and ignore the context surrounding the verses that they choose. For example, John 3:16 is a favorite verse of many in the religious world. They point to this one verse to confirm that God only requires people to believe on Jesus for salvation. However, they ignore the rest of what is said in that context:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God" (John 3:16–21).

By considering the message of John 3:16 in context, it becomes abundantly clear that "whoever believes" only includes those who are not "practicing evil" but rather "does the truth." Jesus made it clear that He was not speaking of only an intellectual belief, but rather belief that leads to obedience, that is, practicing the truth!

Every verse in the scripture is placed in a context. It is important to recognize the context of any passage and understand how a particular verse, phrase, thought or idea fits within that context. We can, in fact, break down the idea of context into smaller parts. Let's start from the larger context to the smaller. We can consider a broad context, and drill down to a more specific context. Every passage sits in the broadest context of being a part of the word of God. As such, we can begin to understand its meaning by understanding how it fits into the broadest context of God's message. All of the scriptures, though being 66 distinct books, fit together to tell one grand story: the story of the salvation of mankind. We can look at the big picture and start to have an idea of how a particular passage fits into that grand context. For example, we might consider the entirety of one book, and ask how it fits into the broad context of God's message of salvation. What role do the books of Esther, or Ruth, or Job play in conveying God's overall message of salvation? While our

goal is not to delve into those texts in detail here, we can consider their general role in the midst of the scriptures. We learn a lot about God, and his plans for people through those books. For example, in the book of Ruth, we get a significant part of the story concerning the lineage of the Messiah. In Esther, we learn about God's providential care for His people. In the book of Job, we learn about the war that rages in the spiritual realm, and of God's victory over Satan. These are general lessons that we learn, and come to understand more about God and His working among mankind. These are all keys to fuller understanding of God's plan, which He has had since the beginning of time, and has revealed through His inspired word.

Next, we might examine how a particular passage fits into the context of a book. What is the broad message of the book itself, and how does the particular passage fit into that message? We can return to our earlier example of John 3:16. We might consider first the purpose of the gospel of John in the broad scheme of the scriptures as a whole. If God's revelation is given to provide the necessary information for man to come to salvation, the gospels, including the gospel of John relate the account of the Messiah who brings that salvation. John's gospel tells us about Jesus, and His role as the Son of God (and as deity) to bring salvation to mankind:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God (John 1:1-2).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

A part of that message is to relate what mankind's obligation to God is. In John 3, Nicodemus came to talk to Jesus. In the midst of that conversation, Jesus told Nicodemus:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

This caused great consternation for Nicodemus who could not understand that Jesus was not speaking literally of being reborn from his mother's womb. Jesus went on to clarify that one must be born "of water and the Spirit" or he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Clearly, Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he had to do something in order to be pleasing to God! Later, Jesus used the example of the children of Israel at the time of the fiery serpents to illustrate His own role in man's salvation. He would be lifted up, and those who "believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:15). The belief that one has in the Messiah is paralleled to the belief the children of Israel had in the image of the fiery serpent. If we return to that passage, we learn that those people had to do more than just have an intellectual belief that God would save them if they acknowledged the existence of the statue. They were required to do something. They had to go out into the camp, and find the statue and look upon it for their healing (Numbers 21:6-9). In much the same way, one has to follow the instructions given by Jesus for salvation.

So, as we get to the passage of John 3:16-21, we must understand how this fits into the broader context of chapter 3, which is addressing what is necessary for "entering the kingdom of God." This section is adding to the information that was found earlier in the same context, explaining how a person comes to be "born again". One would not be "born of water and the Spirit" unless he came to a belief in Jesus. This belief is an active faith, not simply an intellectual endeavor. This is evident as we get to the end of the section where Jesus speaks of how people act. The one who is "practicing evil hates the light" and will not do what he has been instructed to do. However, the one who "does the truth comes to the light..." He is the one who is obedient to the instructions of the Lord. He is the one who is "born of water and the Spirit." The one who truly believes in the Lord will be obedient to the instructions that He has given. The one who claims to believe, but does not obey the instructions, does not really believe.

What we see, when we consider the whole context of John 3, is that we cannot draw verse 16 out and try to make it stand on its own, as if that is the only message that Jesus ever delivered for His disciples. Those who build a complete theology on this one verse, have done a great disservice to the rest of what Jesus said on this occasion. They have ignored the actual instructions that Jesus provided, and instead drawn one verse out of context and defined the words in that verse to support what they want to believe, instead of what Jesus actually said. This is one reason that the context is so very important. We can completely miss the actual instructions of the Lord if we fail to examine and understand the context in which a particular verse or phrase is presented.

It has been said that anything can be proved by the Bible. That is probably true, when and if we ignore a given context. We can formulate a pretty ridiculous theology if we are not careful! Consider this completely unreasonable stringing together of passages, which clearly ignore context:

Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself. (Matthew 27:3-5)

Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. (Philippians 3:17)

Clearly, when Paul said that we should follow the example of the Apostles, he did not mean that we should follow the example of Judas! One could only come to that conclusion by ignoring the whole context of the book of Philippians, and the rest of the New Testament scriptures! However, this illustrates the point that we can draw one verse out of a passage, and end up practicing exactly the opposite of what God would truly have us to do. Those who try to use John 3:16 to dismiss the need for any action on our part are doing just that. They have used a verse that emphasizes the need for obedience to teach that we don't have to be obedient. They are using this passage to teach exactly the opposite of what Jesus was teaching His disciples.

Historical Context

Another idea that needs to be considered when examining biblical passages is the context in which it was written historically. We do need to be very careful with this idea, as it can be abused to dismiss practices that God intends His people to follow. Historical context can help us to understand why something was written or taught when it was taught, but that does not mean that it dismisses the practice from our requirements today.

The Bible was written in history. The men who penned the scriptures were real men, who were teaching real people. Quite often, a general principle of how to handle a problem or issue was delivered into a specific situation. Consider, for example, 1 Corinthians 5. There, Paul had to deal with a specific situation: A man had his father's wife. Paul addressed this specific case of sexual immorality in the church, teaching the brethren how to deal with it. When we read this chapter, we should not conclude that this teaching only applies to the specific case of a man having his father's wife. We learn from this specific case how to deal with un-repentant sin within a congregation. We know how to deal with any type of sexual immorality, or for that matter, any kind of sin that a person refuses to turn away from.

Another example can be found in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4. There, Paul gave the Corinthian brethren instructions concerning taking up a collection of funds to help the needy saints that were in Jerusalem. This instruction was given in a very specific historical context. There was a famine in Jerusalem, and the need among the Christians was far greater than the local brethren could provide for.

So, Paul gave instructions for how that need was to be met, but other congregations providing for what was lacking. Paul gave very specific instructions concerning this practice. However, we should not think that the instructions were limited to that specific need. The instructions given provide guidance for all of the financial needs that the church faces.

It has become quite popular for people to dismiss the instructions of the New Testament simply because the passage was written to someone else, not to us. This would, of course, negate every single passage in scripture, as there are no passages that have been directly written to the current generation!

Part of the historical context is also considering the cultural context. This is another area in which we must be very cautious. Some point to the teachings of the New Testament and claim that the writers were only addressing the circumstances within the culture to which he was writing. While it can often be beneficial to understand the culture to which the inspired authors were writing, to suggest that we must understand each culture, and that the applications can only be made to those in the same culture is ridiculous. The end conclusion would again be that cannot make any kind of application to our lives today! Topics such as modesty, women's roles in the church, and family responsibilities have been completely dismissed because they were addressed to people of another time and place. Changing culture does not change the word of God. Just because our culture becomes less moral, does not mean that we can adapt the word of God to fit our norms. This is what has happened as men attempt to defend the practices of homosexuality and abortion with the Bible. God has given clear instructions, and we must make the applications that He intends. We cannot change God's word to support behaviors that have become acceptable in our culture!

A Journalistic Approach...

When we were in school, we were taught that there is a way to examine the facts, and determine the truth of any given situation. From a journalistic viewpoint, this would be delving into the available information and discovering the answers to the questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? When we study scripture, we can certainly ascertain the truth by addressing the same questions. We can, in fact, figure out the context that a passage is written in by trying to answer those same questions. Discovering the answers will help us to make the appropriate applications from scripture to our own lives today.

Who? When we address this particular question, there are two aspects that should be considered. First, who is writing the given passage? Answering this question will answer the question of authority. When we have established that the author has the right to write the passage under consideration (that is, has been given authority by God to do so (John 16:12-15; Ephesians 3:1-7)) then we can understand that its message holds authority. He had the right to command, or give instructions at the time that he penned the message. Secondly, we must address who the passage was written to. This brings us to an important concept that we must examine: audience of a passage.

When we read a passage of scripture, it is obvious that the author was not writing that passage to us directly. We, therefore are not the *primary audience* of the author. The primary audience of any given writing is the audience for which it was originally written. So, for example, the epistles of 1st and 2nd Corinthians were written to the Christians in Corinth. They were the primary audience for the message that Paul wrote. However, Paul intended for the epistles that he wrote to be passed from one group of Christians to others:

Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

Those who received the letters from the primary audience became the *secondary audience*. The letter was not written directly to them, nor addressed to them, but they could and would benefit from it anyway. Even though this secondary group may not have the exact same problems that were being addressed among the primary group, they could learn how to make applications that would benefit them. For most of the scriptures we would fall into what we would consider a secondary audience. Nothing has been written directly to us, but just like the example given above, we can surely learn much from the writings to those early churches, and know how to make applications to our own circumstances.

There is also what may be considered a *tertiary audience* in scripture. One example of this might be that of the prophecies against the nations in the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. God sent prophecies concerning the nations around Israel through His own prophets. The messages, especially in the book of Ezekiel, were delivered directly to the people of Israel, thus making them the primary audience. However, the message was concerning the nations around Israel, and were to be delivered to those people as well, making them the secondary audience. There were direct applications that were supposed to be made by both the Israelites and the nations around them. We, as we read the prophecies concerning the nations, become the tertiary (or third) audience. We do not have any direct applications to be made concerning those prophecies, and yet we learn a lot of principles that we can use to make sound applications to our lives.

Understanding the nature of these audiences helps us to understand how the scriptures can apply to us today. To dismiss any biblical passage simply because we are not the primary audience is to be disingenuous with the text. The things of the Old Testament are written “for our learning”, while the text of the New Testament is the covenant that has been delivered for all men of all time. Even though we might be a secondary audience, we are still expected by God to learn His will for us and put it into application.

What? As we examine a context, it is important to identify what the author intended for us to learn from his writings. What principle or doctrine is being established? When we are trying to decipher what an author was directing in a given passage, we have an obligation to be true to what is written, and not read into a passage what we want to believe or practice. Far too often, men will decide what they want to believe and then turn to the pages of the scriptures to try and support that belief. Recently, I have received two different articles through email lists that have taken this approach. The first went to great lengths to dismiss Peter’s teaching in 1 Peter 3:21, where Peter clearly declares, “There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism...” The whole of the article was to explain why baptism does not really “now save us.” The second article was taken from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in which he declared:

Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church (1 Corinthians 14:34–35).

This particular article went to great lengths to dismiss Paul’s teachings, declaring that women really do not have any kind of limitations placed upon them. At the heart of both of these articles was the fact that the authors did not care for what the Bible taught, and therefore sought to make it say what they liked. Of course, in the end they taught the exact opposite of what the inspired writers were teaching in their writings.

Truth is not found in our desires, but rather in the revelation of God’s mind:

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no

prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19–21).

We have no right to look for “private interpretation” to the scriptures. They mean what God intended for them to mean, not what we would like for them to mean. It is, therefore, our obligation to work toward understanding what God meant by the words He chose for us. We cannot seek to use the Bible to defend our own selfish desires.

The Bible teaches us how we are to conduct ourselves in every aspect of our lives. It addresses our outward actions, and it addresses our beliefs, our thoughts, our minds. As we consider *what* a passage is speaking of in its context, we can consider whether it is addressing a specific action that we should do or not do, or if it is addressing an attitude that we should have or not have. Or perhaps it is addressing a belief that we should hold, or not hold. Some passages tell us specifically what we should be doing. Others show a general idea of the nature we should have. Others still address specific tenants of belief that we should hold to. We must take all of this into consideration when we address the question: What?

When? We have, to some extent, already discussed the idea of when in a previous section concerning the historical context of a passage. The historical context in some ways matters greatly. Knowing when a passage was penned can help us to know what covenant is under consideration. As we saw in a previous study, we are only amenable to the covenant that has been given to us. If a passage was penned before our current covenant, then we know that we are not responsible for the specifics of that instruction (even though we may be able to gain great benefit from it).

In some ways, the *when* of a passage is immaterial. It is always beneficial to consider when a passage was written, but what if we cannot discern the answer to that question? There are many passages in scripture that are impossible to pinpoint on a time line. However, their significance is not diminished simply because we cannot identify exactly when they were written. One good example of this is the book of Job. There has been much debate about when Job lived. The differing opinions on the date of this book is made evident when looking at various Bible reading plans that attempt to put the Bible into chronological order. The book of Job shows up in different places based on the belief of the schedule’s author. However, we should not discount the value of the materials found within the book of Job simply because we cannot identify the time that it was written.

Trying to figure out the date of a particular passage is a worthwhile endeavor. There may be keys to understanding the passage that are found in the dating of that passage. For example, a study of the books of Kings and Chronicles reveals much overlap. Figuring out various dates (either generally, or specifically) can help us to harmonize the texts. We can, for example, identify kings by different names in the books based on the established time lines presented. The same general principle can be established in a harmonization of the four gospels. By establishing a general time line, we can harmonize the events as they occur in the various gospels. There are many who claim that the gospels are either inaccurate, or contradictory because they have not been able to put the events of each book into chronological order. Sometimes, establishing the time of a particular passage helps us to understand the nature of the history of that day. One thing we will see in future studies is that the biblical authors did not record history like we are used to. Sometimes, rather than recording a chronological history, they record a thematic one. This is why events don’t always follow the same pattern through the gospels.

We are looking for anything that can help us to accurately understand God’s will for us. We should not, however, use the dating of a passage as an excuse to ignore its content. As we mentioned earlier in this study, citing the fact that it was written a long time ago to people other than us, is not