

The Contextual Principle

Lesson 2

Intro: In this lesson we will focus on the necessity of studying a passage of Scripture in the light of its context. Many erroneous doctrines have been produced when a single verse, phrase, or word in Scripture is used as a “spring board” for an idea or viewpoint.

Definitions of Important Terms or Phrases:

Context: The general series or composition of a discourse; more particularly, the parts of a discourse which precede or follow the sentence quoted; the passages of scripture which are near the text, either before it or after it.

Immediate context: The words or verses which are close in proximity to the portion being studied.

Larger context: The passages of Scripture preceding or following the portion being studied including such information as author, recipient, theme, prominent terms, historical setting, etc. of the text.

Extended context: Remote verses and/or passages which speak on the same subject matter, or refer to ideas related to the subject.

I. Understanding the Types of Context:

A. The immediate context: Close words or verses.

1. A verse should always be studied in light of the verse or verses preceding and following it.
2. When a verse gets taken out of its setting, it can very easily be twisted or perverted to prove nearly any idea.

3. Diligent study of God’s Word cannot be made without a complete and thorough examination of a passage. Many times simply reading the verses surrounding the passage will give the accurate meaning of its use.

Example: A phrase taken out of context. Psalm 14:1 “...*There is no God.*”

Out of context: The Bible explicitly states that there is no God.

However in context the verse reads- _____

Now by a quick read of the entire verse it is very clear that David is saying: “*The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.*”

While many misinterpretations may seem harmless, it is this type of blindness to the immediate context which often leads to much larger doctrinal errors.

B. The larger context: Background information and passages proceeding and following.

1. Many verses are better understood when the reader understands the following:

- a. The author and recipient of the Scripture – Who is writing and who is he writing to?
- b. The historical context of the writing – What is the secular and religious atmosphere at the time of the writing? Can any outside influences be identified?
- c. Problems or circumstances being addressed in the entire book – What is the theme of the book.

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The following are a few questions that when asked will make interpretation much more reliable. (*How to Interpret the Bible*, Floyd Barackman)

- a. What is the immediate context of the passage to be interpreted and its theme?
- b. What is the larger context of the passage to be interpreted and its theme?
- c. Who is writing and/or speaking?
- d. Who is being addressed?
- e. What does the context contribute to the passage being interpreted?
- f. What does the passage being interpreted say in light of its context?

C. The extended context: Relative information found throughout the entire Bible.

1. Often cross-referencing a subject throughout the Scriptures will shed considerable light on the interpretation of the idea being studied.
2. Applying rules of hermeneutics will aid the Bible student in discovering the true meaning of a passage or topic.

D. Applying the principles of context: (*How to Interpret the Bible*, Floyd Barackman)

1. Interpreting a text, or passage, according to its context contributes to the accuracy of the interpretation.
2. As the proper place, with its context, gives meaning to a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, so the context gives meaning to a text and ties it to the rest of the Scriptures. Apart from its context, a text might mean anything that one might imagine.

Using Philippians 4:19 as a text to be interpreted according to its context, let us seek answers to the questions from section B.

- a. The immediate context is verses 18 and 19. Paul states that he has everything he needs in verse 18 and he is sure God will provide for their needs. The theme is assurance.
- b. The larger context is verses 10-20. The theme here is Paul's acknowledgment of the Philippians' gifts.
- c. The writer is the apostle Paul.
- d. The addressees are the believers at Philippi. (1:1)
- e. The context tells why God will provide for the material needs of the Philippians. In verses 14 through 18, we see they had been generous to Paul.
- f. In light of the context, the text assures that God will provide for the Philippians' material needs since they were mindful of Paul's needs.
- g. Paul assures his readers that God will make up for any lack that they may have incurred because of their generosity toward him.

Closing: Taking the time to determine the context of a passage in our study is of the utmost importance. Many of the false doctrines taught from pulpits today were developed by simply taking a verser or passage out of its context. We need to be so careful in our own study and in teaching that we ensure we are interpreting the Bible accurately. One of the main ways this is ensured and accomplished in by making sure the context is correct.

Homework assignment: _____

Give an example of a Bible verse that is often misunderstood because of