

Context: Our Main Ingredient in Understanding Scripture

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Session: 1 of 3

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“What is the worst sin a Bible reader can commit? The question sounds dramatic, but it is a serious one. God places enormous weight on how we handle His Word. He demands that we approach it with care, with honesty, and above all, with attention to the setting in which every word was written.”- Lon Dandis

That attention is what we mean when we speak of context — and this session makes the case that context is not merely one tool among many. **It is the main ingredient in faithful interpretation.**

The Bible as God's Complete Message

When you receive a handwritten letter from someone you love, you do not open it and scan for phrases that happen to catch your eye. You read the whole thing, because the meaning lives in the whole — in the movement of thought from beginning to end, in the relationship between what is said early and what is said late, in the sense of a single voice speaking to you across the page.

The Bible is that kind of letter. From Genesis to Revelation, God wove a continuous thread telling His story of redemption. The entire Bible reveals who God is and testifies about Jesus Christ. Each book has a purpose. The various types of composition and content each emphasise different nuances of God's Word, and together they form a coherent, unified message.

Context in Bible study is therefore not optional. Every part of God's Word must be understood in light of the whole message. A verse standing alone may sound meaningful — it may even sound true — but it has not yet been understood. Understanding comes when we see a part in relation to the whole.

*Source: Don Landis, "Context is King," Answers in Genesis, October 1, 2013.
answersingenesis.org/hermeneutics/context-is-king/*

Written For Us, Not To Us

We are naturally self-centred readers. Our first instinct when we open the Bible is to ask: what does this mean to me? This instinct is not entirely wrong — Scripture was given for our benefit. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete and equipped for every good work. It was given for us.

But it was not written to us. Paul's letters to Timothy were written to Timothy — a young pastor in Ephesus in the first century, navigating specific problems in a specific church community. We must first understand what those letters meant to their original recipients before we can faithfully apply them to ourselves. Bypassing that step does not make our reading more personal. It makes it less honest.

*Source: Jana Carlson, "Bible Study Tips for Beginners: The Importance of Context."
janacarlson.com/bible-study-tips-for-beginners-the-importance-of-context/*

What Context Actually Means

The English word context comes from the Latin verb *contexere*, which means to weave together. The Latin adjective *contextus* means interwoven and closely joined. Every text is always woven into a larger historical whole, and that larger whole is what we call its context.

A helpful way to hold the word in mind is to note that the prefix *con* in Latin means with. Context is simply what comes with the text — the surrounding fabric of words, history, culture, purpose, and occasion in which any given passage was written and first received.

“Context is the ability to see the words in their own world, independent of your setting, and dependent on the eyes of the writers and the first readers.”

When we strip a verse from this surrounding fabric, we are no longer drawing meaning out of what the author wrote. We are reading our own meaning in. The technical term for reading meaning out of a text honestly is **exegesis**. The term for reading our own meaning into it is **eisegesis**. Context is the primary safeguard that keeps us in the territory of the former and out of the latter.

Source: “Context, Interpretation and Application,” *The Living Church*.
livingchurch.org/covenant/context-interpretation-application/

The Five Primary Rules of Context

Context is not a single thing. It is a set of overlapping dimensions, each of which must be considered for interpretation to be complete. There are five primary rules that govern faithful reading.

1. The Rule of Literary Context — Immediate and Extended

A text must be interpreted in light of what precedes and follows it. Language works through hierarchical relationships: a word's meaning is shaped by its sentence, a sentence by its paragraph, a paragraph by its chapter, and a chapter by the book as a whole. There are two levels of literary context to hold together.

Immediate context: The sentences directly surrounding the verse. Philippians 4:13 — "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" — is frequently taken to mean that God will help us achieve any goal we set. But its immediate context shows that Paul is speaking about contentment in every material circumstance, whether in want or in abundance. The strength Christ gives is the strength to be at peace regardless of situation.

Extended context: The larger argument or section of the biblical book in which the passage appears.

2. The Rule of Historical and Cultural Context

A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its original author or first audience. Faithful interpretation requires stepping back into the ancient world to understand the environment in which the text was written. This involves three areas of investigation.

The author and audience: Who wrote it, what was their state of mind, and who were they addressing?

The occasion and purpose: Why was the book written? What specific problem or situation was the author responding to?

Cultural factors: The social customs, political systems, geography, economic realities, and religious practices of the time. Understanding Greco-Roman patron-client relationships, for example, transforms how one reads Paul's language about debt, obligation, and grace. Understanding Ancient Near Eastern covenant forms illuminates the Sinai covenant far more vividly than a modern reading alone can.

3. The Rule of Canonical Context

The Bible is a coherent, self-consistent whole with a single divine Author behind its many human authors. This means that Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture — a principle known as the Analogy of Faith. Clear passages should be used to illuminate obscure or difficult ones, and no interpretation of a passage should contradict the plain teaching of the rest of Scripture.

This rule also requires attention to progressive revelation. God disclosed His truth over time. Later revelation — particularly the New Testament — often unpacks, fulfils, or clarifies what the Old Testament established in type, shadow, and promise. Interpretation that ignores the movement of revelation through Scripture is always incomplete.

4. The Rule of Grammatical-Syntactical Context

Words do not communicate in a vacuum. They operate through grammatical relationships — verbs, tenses, conjunctions, and sentence structures — that carry meaning as surely as the words themselves do. Ignoring syntax can completely invert what an author intended. The way clauses are connected determines whether a passage is conditional, causal, purposive, or consecutive, and these distinctions matter enormously for doctrine and for application.

5. The Rule of Genre Context

The Bible is not a uniform textbook. It is a library containing diverse literary genres, and the rules of meaning shift depending on the literary form in which a text is written.

Historical narrative: Records what happened, which is descriptive of events but not always prescriptive of what should happen. What a narrative reports is not always what God endorses.

Poetry and prophecy: Relies heavily on hyperbole, metaphor, and figurative imagery. These forms must not be flattened into a wooden literalism that was never intended.

The Epistles: Occasional, logical arguments written to specific churches in response to specific situations. They are letters before they are theology textbooks.

A Warning from Church History

The temptation to misuse context is not new. The history of the church is full of examples of communities that began with sound interpretive principles and gradually allowed other loyalties to override them. Two moments from Louis Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* are instructive here.

Calvin and the First Business of the Interpreter

John Calvin was, by common consent, the greatest exegete of the Reformation. His expositions covered nearly all the books of the Bible, and their value is still recognised today. He firmly believed in the typical significance of much in the Old Testament but did not share the tendency of some of his contemporaries to find Christ hidden on every page regardless of whether the text pointed there. He insisted that the prophets be interpreted in the light of their historical circumstances. As he saw it, the chief excellency of an expositor consisted in lucid brevity.

"The first business of an interpreter is to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say." — John Calvin

This is one of the finest definitions of faithful reading ever written. The interpreter's task is to listen before speaking — to resist the temptation to make the text say what feels right or what is needed for a particular argument, and instead to hear what the author actually said.

The Period of Confessionalism

The generation that followed the Reformation made a revealing and sobering mistake. Theoretically, they held to the sound principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. But in practice their exegesis increasingly served their confessional documents rather than the text of Scripture itself. Each theological faction searched the Bible not to hear from God afresh but to confirm what their tradition had already decided. Exegesis became the handmaid of dogmatics, and degenerated into a mere search for proof-texts.

This is not simply an ancient problem. It is a temptation that any church, any tradition, and any individual reader can fall into when the desire to confirm replaces the willingness to hear. The lesson Berkhof draws from this period is a permanent one: the health of biblical interpretation depends on a continual willingness to let the text speak on its own terms.

Source: Louis Berkhof, Principles of Biblical Interpretation, p. 21. ("History of Hermeneutical Principles in the Christian Church.")

Four Models for Understanding Biblical Meaning

Before moving into the application section on reading the NT Epistles, this session engages with a critical question: ***how have interpreters across history understood the task of finding meaning in Scripture?***

A full treatment of this topic is provided in the companion document for this session: **"Four Models for Understanding the Meaning of the Bible" — a summary drawn from the introduction of Walter C. Kaiser Jr.'s Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning (the chapter titled "The Meaning of Meaning")**. Please refer to that document alongside these notes.

The four models covered are: the Proof-Text Method, the Historical-Critical Method, the Reader-Response Method, and the Syntactical-Theological Method. The Syntactical-Theological Method is the approach this course commends — one that takes the grammar and history of the text seriously, traces its theological significance, and brings it to bear on the life of the church today.

Reading the New Testament Epistles in Context

Having laid this foundation, we turn to the most practical dimension of the session: how do the rules of context apply when we read the New Testament Epistles? The primary reference for this section is Chapter 11 of *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* by Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moisés Silva, with the discussion texts drawn from page 226.

The Epistles are occasional literature. They were not written as timeless theological treatises suspended above history. They were written to real churches, addressing real crises — heresies, moral failures, pastoral emergencies, internal conflicts, and questions about practice and doctrine. Understanding the occasion is the entry point for faithful reading.

Discussion Texts

The following passages repay careful contextual reading. For each one, the goal is to read the text in light of its immediate surroundings, the broader argument of the letter, the historical situation it addresses, and the canonical witness of the rest of Scripture.

2 Timothy 2:15 *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”*

The mandate for the work of interpretation. What does it mean to rightly handle the word of truth, and what does its opposite look like in practice?

1 Timothy 4:8 *“Bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”*

Often used to endorse or alternatively to dismiss physical exercise. What is the actual comparison Paul is drawing for Timothy, and what is the larger argument of this section of the letter?

1 Timothy 1:20 *“Among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”*

A text about church discipline. What does the phrase handed over to Satan mean in its first-century cultural and theological context, and how does it relate to Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 5?

1 Corinthians 5:4-5 *“When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”*

The extended context of the Corinthian church and the specific moral situation Paul is addressing is essential for reading this passage faithfully. What was the occasion, and what does the instruction reveal about Paul's understanding of the church's authority?

1 Corinthians 6:1-2 *"When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?"*

What does the saints will judge the world mean in Paul's argument here, and what does the canonical background of that claim add to its force? What is Paul calling the Corinthians to do with their disputes?

Hebrews 6:4-6 *"For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance..."*

One of the most debated passages in the New Testament. The immediate context, the extended argument of Hebrews, and the canonical witness of the rest of Scripture must all be brought to bear before any conclusion is drawn. (Reference: page 226 of Kaiser and Silva.)

Closing Text — Bridge into Session Two

Session One closes with Philippians 2:6-11. This passage will serve as the opening text of Session Two, where it will be opened in full. Read it carefully now, and carry it with you.

Philippians 2:6-11 *“...who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

This passage — commonly called the Christ Hymn — is itself a masterclass in what we have been studying today. Its full meaning cannot be grasped without attending to its literary structure, its historical and cultural setting in Philippi, its grammatical relationships, its canonical connections to Isaiah 45, and the occasion of Paul's letter to this particular church. Session Two will begin here.

The question to carry into the week: if context is the main ingredient in understanding Scripture, what habits do you need to build — and what habits do you need to break — in order to become the kind of reader God is calling you to be?

Recommended References

Authoritative Books

Berkhof, Louis (1950). *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*.

Why it matters: A classic, foundational textbook detailing the grammatical, historical, and theological frameworks of sacred hermeneutics.

Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. & Silva, Moisés (2007). *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. Zondervan.

Why it matters: This text masterfully balances the text's historical meaning with its contemporary application and relevance, focusing deeply on genre contexts.

Fee, Gordon D. & Stuart, Douglas (2014). *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Zondervan.

Why it matters: Widely considered the most accessible entry point for understanding how historical context and literary genre impact interpretation.

Klein, William W., Blomberg, Craig L. & Hubbard, Robert L. Jr. (2017). *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics*. Thomas Nelson.

Why it matters: Highly academic and comprehensive, dealing extensively with the pre-understandings and subjective presuppositions that readers bring to a text.

Helpful Academic & Web Resources

The Gospel Coalition (TGC) / BibleMesh — thegospelcoalition.org: Features continuous essays, courses, and articles breaking down the Grammatical-Historical Method and principles of context.

Monergism — monergism.com: Hosts a vast, free digital library of historic texts on hermeneutics, including Louis Berkhof's full *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* and articles on the Analogy of Faith.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Hermeneutics Section) — plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics: Excellent for understanding the broader philosophical shift of interpretation theory, from classic textual reading to Gadamerian and Ricoeurian frameworks.