

PRINCIPLE II - OBSERVE THE CONTEXT

The Bible is no mere collection of good texts or verses put together without any relation to one another. Context is one of the most important considerations in accurate interpretation; it is also probably the most abused factor. A well-known saying states, "A text taken out of context is a pretext."

Why is context important? "Context is basic because it forces the interpreter to examine the entire line of thought of the writer. When the interpreter projects his own ideas into the thought he is interpreting, he ceases being an honest interpreter and becomes a personal propagandist under the guise of explaining the work of another." (Mickelsen)

The Immediate Context

The next larger unit of thought encompassing a statement is a paragraph. Bernard Ramm has excellently stated, "The material before the passage is the radar which guides the approaching, and the following material is the radar of the leaving. And if we can track the material approaching and leaving the particular passage, we have the framework in which the passage is to be understood."

It is always a wise practice, then, to read carefully that which precedes and follows the statement in the Bible that a person is studying. The key to this is repeated reading, until the student begins to enter into the thought pattern of the writer. A good way to measure whether or not one understands the immediate context is to attempt to write a concise summary of it.

Illustration - Philippians 1:19 reads For I know that this shall turn out for my salvation through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Does Paul mean that his own spiritual salvation will come about in answer to the Philippians' prayers and the provision of the Spirit? A reading of the paragraph in which this statement occurs reveals that Paul was in prison (see v. 13,14) but expected to be released soon (see v. 24,25; also note Phil. 2:24). The salvation spoken of here is deliverance (as the NASV renders it) from prison!

The Book Context

It is also imperative that the interpreter of Scripture understand the theme and development of thought of the book in which a given statement occurs.

"...by observing what precedes and follows a passage, the interpreter has a greater opportunity to see what the writer was seeking to convey to his original readers. These readers did not plunge into the middle of the letter and seize out a few consecutive sentences. They read carefully the whole document. To treat material fairly the modern interpreter must enter into the total train of thought. Originally there were no verses or chapter divisions, so we must note carefully the breaks or shifts in thought." (Mickelsen)

Once again, repeated reading is the key to mastering this facet of context. Ideally, an interpreter should not settle on an understanding of a specific statement until he is able to think through the development of thought in the book in which the statement occurs. A good way to measure this is to attempt to outline the thought of the book. Another method is to attempt to write a synopsis (=a brief condensation or summary) of the book.

Illustration - Some chapter divisions are well-placed at clear breaks in thought, but others are unfortunate. For example, Matthew 16:28 records Jesus saying Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom. Whatever did Jesus mean? And when was this fulfilled? The answer comes in reading on into the next chapter. Notice the first verse of chapter 17; And six days later....Matthew proceeds to

record the fulfillment of this promise in the immediately following verses, a fact readily apparent if the chapter division is ignored. Another unfortunate division occurs at Hebrews 12 where the first verses are the concluding "punch" to the argument of chapter 11. It is unfailingly helpful to understand the theme and argument of a book of the Bible in interpreting the meaning of a statement in that book.

The Bible Context

Every statement of Scripture also needs to be understood in the context of the teaching of the entire Bible. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable. To properly comprehend a specific statement in Scripture involves an awareness of -

-its connection with related truth in God's Word. Since God superintended the writing of the Bible, all the parts fit together into a consistent whole. Hence, particulars must be interpreted in harmony with what whole.

-its place in the progressive unfolding of God's revelation. God gradually revealed truth to mankind. He didn't "unload" it on us all at once (the Bible was written over a period of more than 1500 years). And so, God's revelation is perfect at any given point in its progressive unfolding, but it was not always complete (there was more to come!). today, it is complete (see 1 Corinthians 2:10; 2 Timothy 3:16,27; Jude 3; Revelation 22:28,19).

Interpreting a statement in light of related truth revealed in God's Word is sometimes described by the phrases, "comparing Scripture with Scripture," or "letting Scripture interpret Scripture." A perfect written revelation, such as we have in the Bible, cannot have any real contradictions (this is not to say, however, that there are no "apparent" contradictions, paradoxes or difficulties in Scripture). The particulars of God's Word, when properly understood, complement the whole. There is diversity in the Bible, but it is a diversity in unity (just as an harmonious musical chord consists of several different notes). The accurate student of the Scriptures is thus the one who interprets the details of the Bible in harmony with the teaching of the whole.

Illustration - A widely-known "contradiction" in the Bible is that between Paul and James. Paul writes we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of law (Romans 3:28) and James writes you see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone (James 2:24). Certainly, if we take these verses in isolation from their immediate contexts, there does seem to be a direct contradiction. However, noting their immediate contexts and their place in the books in which they occur prevents us from falling into the error of saying they are contradictory. Paul, in Romans, is setting forth the channel through which a person can be justified (-"declared righteous") by God. James is contesting against faith without works (James 2:14,17,18,20), contending, as some would say, for "shoeleather" Christianity. A truly saved person, James insists, will be shown to be righteous (= "justified," for this use of "justify" see Matthew 11:19, Luke 7:29; 10:29) by his deeds. As Calvin aptly put it, Paul insists that faith alone saves; James insists that the faith that saves is never alone. And so, rather than a contradiction, these truths of Scripture beautifully complement one another!

An awareness of a statement's place in the progressive unfolding of God's revelation to man is also crucial. A careful student must discern where the passage under study lies in the gradual unveiling of truth by God. By "progressive unfolding," we do not mean that God has changed, nor that the early installments or stages in the revelation were inaccurate. It simply recognizes that truth was revealed in many stages (Hebrews 2:1,2), that Scripture underwent an organic growth from incomplete to complete, from promise to fulfillment, from shadow to substance.

Bible students sometimes describe these progressive stages of Bible history as "dispensations." This word means "management of a household" in New Testament Greek.

Illustration - If you walk down the street in any town and stop at several houses, you will find that each house is run a little differently. IN the first home, they may have a rule that each one must clean up his own room every morning. IN the next house, the father may insist that no one is to look at his evening paper until he has had a chance to read it. He may also have a rule that his son is to keep the grass mowed. To reward his son for keeping it mowed, he may take him swimming. IN one house, there may be a teen-age daughter whose parents require her to be home by nine o'clock in the evening. But next door there may be another teen-age girl whose parents will allow her to stay out until twelve o'clock if she wants to.

As we go up and down the street we notice that there are different rules for each household--rules to live by. The rules they keep (or break) will not make them members of the family, because each one is already a member. But broken rules can cause much trouble in the household.

In the same way, God has utilized various "houserules" in dealing with those who belong to Him throughout history. These "house-rules" are also called dispensations.

Now, each dispensation has differences in the rules that God's people are to live by. But these different rules are not different ways to be saved. Man has always been saved by faith in Christ (in Old Testament times, salvation came through faith in the promise that a Saviour would come).

Imagine how much confusion there would be and how difficult it would be if you went up and down the block and wrote down the rules of every house-hold and then you tried to keep all the rules? Many of the rules would conflict. It could be an impossible task to keep all the rules. This is the point: there are different groups of people mentioned in the Bible to whom God gave differing sets of rules by which to live. If we are going to understand the Scriptures, it will help if we think of the various periods of time as households with specific rules for the family members of each household.

Each dispensation is composed, then, of a unique set of "house-rules" or principles. We can recognize a change in God's dispensational arrangement of history when the following converge at appoint in history.

1. A continuance of certain ordinances which were previously valid (certain rules continue unchanged)
2. An annulment of other regulations which were previously in force (circumcision, which is strongly commanded in Exodus 4:24,25, is sharply forbidden as part of the rules for living in this dispensation, Galatians 5:2-6)
3. An introduction of new principles which were not valid before (think, for example, of the building of a new spiritual temple, the church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 1:18,24, something previously unheard of, Ephesians 3:3-6)

Illustration - Many seeming contradictions in Scripture are resolved by simply paying attention to where they fall in the dispensations. Look up Matthew 10:1-6 and 28:18-20. Can you resolve the apparent contradiction in these passages (which occur in the same book of Scripture!)?

It is crucial, then, to determine where a command or promise falls in God's progressive unveiling of truth. All Scripture is for me (All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable) but not all Scripture is to me (many of the commands and promises are not addressed to me, but rather to people living under other dispensational arrangements). The importance of observing the context is underlined in the following piece.

"WITHOUT A CONTEXT"

by Bob Lair

"One of the favorite pastimes of some Christians is the 'proof text' game. One merely selects verses and commits them to memory without any real concern about the contexts in which the verses are found. Then, at an appropriate moment, he recites the verses as proof of various points of argument. Often we are so busy that we don't have the patience to give the Word of God the exacting care it deserves.

"Let me illustrate. Frequently, when a young child says something highly provocative or something which moves adults greatly, someone will quickly offer: "Well, you know, the Bible says, A little child shall lead them.' Everyone present nods in agreement, satisfied that here is another example of the fulfillment of the Word of God. Such a spirit is admirable, but it also shows a misunderstanding of the passage in which the clause is found. Isaiah is speaking of the magnificence of the Millennial Kingdom of Jesus Christ, when the very creation itself appears restored to harmony and peace. The beasts of the wild shall be docile: The wolf...shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and the little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6). It is, then, not a picture of children leading adults to wisdom by their prodigious behavior, but instead the image of the child leading the wild beasts of the jungle about, so tame are they now when Christ sits upon the throne of David.

"When I was a child, I frequently attended a small Bible study group which ended each of its meetings by quoting Genesis 31:49: The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another. I grew up thinking it a lovely reminder of God's tender care for loved ones when they are separated for one reason or another. However, when I finally turned to the context, it became clear that the verse had no such implication. Obviously Laban and Jacob did not trust one another; they feared treachery each at the other's hands. When they were forced to promise not to abuse one another, Laban said, in effect: 'Now, I'm not going to be able to spend all my time keeping an eye on you, but you just remember that the Lord's got His eye on you, so you can't get away with anything while I'm gone.' A verse out of context.

"A third often misused passage is that in which Christ urges: Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them (Matthew 7:20, cf. 7:16). I hear it quoted almost invariably as the formula by which one can judge whether or not man is saved. In the first place, such judgment is none of our business; salvation is of the Lord and He knows those who are His. A careful study of the passage at hand, however, will show that Jesus did not mean it as such a formula at all, but as a means by which we could identify false prophets. They will give themselves away by their fruits.

"Or what about this example which you no doubt have quoted often yourself: Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God have prepared for them that love him (1 Corinthians 2:9)? It describes heaven, you think? Not in its context, it doesn't. Notice the words which follow: But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit....Paul is describing the secret wisdom of God which no man can comprehend merely with his senses: these matters must be revealed by the Holy Spirit, and they have already been revealed by Him -- no future mystery of eternity, but the present revelation of God's 'deep things' by His

Spirit.

"The Bible speaks of men who wrest the Scripture to their own destruction. surely no one of us would wish to misuse the Word of God' yet, through our careless habits of Bible study, we too frequently have misquoted it or used verses to support our arguments when they have no intrinsic relation whatsoever. May God give us discernment and earnest desire for understanding His Book so that we will not be guilty of citing Scripture without a context."