

The Bible

Bible Study - How To Study Contextually

Clarification of What “Context” Means?

To study contextually is to determine the meaning of a verse or word within the broader setting in which it is found.

When a passage of the scriptures are under consideration, then to study contextually means to consider which book the statement is in, at what juncture of the book, and at what place in the chapter the verse is. The meaning of the words and contents of the passage is dependent on these variables. For instance, when is it recorded that “Jesus wept” (Jn. 11:35)? Would it have made a difference had it been while He stayed where He was (Jn. 11:6)? John gives his reasons for writing his gospel in John 20:30-31. Would it have made a difference had it been at the end of His public ministry in chapter 12, or at the end of the book when he writes, “There are also many other things which Jesus did” (Jn. 21:25)? Why did he not put the two statements beginning with, “Many other” (Jn. 20:30 and 21:25) together?



By studying contextually it is observed that commands given to one individual do not necessarily apply to every believer of every age. Nevertheless, there will be lessons to be learnt from the information given.

For instance:

- a) Noah was told to, “make thee an ark” (Gen. 6:14), but this was for a one time only situation when God was going to bring a flood, something he would never do again (Gen. 9:11-17), so for anyone to build an ark today because of a coming flood would be foolishness. However, we do learn that he obeyed God, and although few responded to his warnings, he was faithful in his proclamation (2 Pet. 2:5).
- b) A verse often quoted during the recent U.S.A. election was, “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14). The context will show this verse was spoken to Solomon and Israel. It had nothing to do with the USA. Indeed, the wickedness exhibited has not decreased, but has grown expedientially. This is not only a failure to keep in context, but giving it an application void of truth.
- c) God told the ancient Israelites that they were to approach Him with an animal sacrifice (Lev. 1:2). At what juncture in their history were they told to offer the sacrifices? Was it while in Egypt or after their redemption? Are the sacrifices then shadows of how a believer ought to approach God, since these people had been redeemed by blood (Ex. 6:6; 12:13; 15:13) and delivered by power (Ex. 15:1-22).

Illustrations Of Contextual Study

In John 10:11 the Lord gave the illustration of Himself as the Good shepherd. To study contextually the student must consider to whom was He speaking, about whom was He speaking, and how does this relate to the man being cast out of the temple (Jn. 9:34) When Luke also gives a parable of the Shepherd (Lk. 15:4), how does that differ in background from John?

Two of the best known verses in the scriptures are:

- a) “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn. 3:16)
- b) “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (1 Jn. 2:15)
- c) It will be observed that the words “world” and “love” occur in both verses and appear to show that God is not consistent. In John 3:16 it is recorded that He loved the world and in 1 John 2:15 we are commanded not to love the world! Does this mean we are not to love what God loves? Someone might argue that the words translated “love” or “world” are perhaps different. However, that is not the case for in both verses the word translated “love” is “agapao”, and “world” is the translation of “kosmos”.

The Bible

Bible Study - How To Study Contextually

- i) The answer to the apparent confusion is cleared up by considering the context. In John 3:16 the entire section is dealing with the salvation of sinners whether the individual is a religious Jew (Jn. 3:1) or a Samaritan woman (Jn. 4:7-28). It is in the broad context of evangelism that the Lord is called, “the Saviour of the world” (Jn. 4:42) and thus the word “world” is referring to the people of the world. Yet great care must be taken for in John 3:17 it is recorded, “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.” In this case the word “world” is used in two distinct ways. “For God sent not his Son into the world (this sphere) to condemn the world (of people); but that the world (of people) through him might be saved”. From this it is evident that the same word in one verse can have two different meanings and yet be perfectly conformed to the context.

Some time ago I sat with a number of believers, all soundly saved for years, and I told them I could prove from scripture they were not saved. They looked at me aghast, so I reminded them of Paul when writing to the Corinthians, and despite the numerous blessings they had (1 Cor. 1:2-7), he then wrote concerning them, “Ye are yet in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). Quickly they asked, “What is the context?” I showed them the verse and it reads, “And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). We are yet in our sins if Christ is not risen from the dead, but He is risen from the dead and we are no longer in our sins. The context was vital for the truth being expressed as it always is.

Advancement In Contextual Study

Beyond the immediate context there must be taken into consideration the historical-grammatical setting of the words or phrase. My wife and I are from Belfast, Northern Ireland, and consequently we have our own “Belfast language”. At times my sons and daughter-in-law will look at their respective spouses and ask, “What does that mean?” To Jean and I it is self explanatory but not to others. Therefore, when we read Biblical clauses there are some which might make us scratch our heads and wonder what is meant. It is simply because we do not know the historical-grammatical setting.

- a) With that in mind, what does the Bible mean when it recorded, “Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine” (Matt. 7:6). The first matter is the context in which this is found. The Lord had spoken about, “judge not” (Matt. 7:1) and that, if taken to the ultimate, means that all evaluation and assessment is wrong. Therefore, the Lord balances His statement with the words of the text (Matt. 7:6). Christians are to help others in need whether it be another saint (1 Jn. 3:17), an enemy (Rom. 12:20), or unknown persons as the parable of the good Samaritan indicates (Lk. 10:33). However, there must be the evaluation of when to give spiritual help and the error to continue helping even after there is outright refusal, and by seeking to help the individual hinders their own spiritual progression. It is in this light Heb. 6:1-6 tells us to, “go on”.
- b) The scriptures are their own best interpreter and Peter speaks about dogs and pigs, “But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire” (2 Pet. 2:22). Pigs and dogs see no value in that which is costly or beautiful, and if dealing with an individual who repeatedly sees no value in the person and teachings of the Lord, then do not waste time and effort on presenting spiritual truths to them. Your efforts will only result in them regarding it as worthless.

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

Rowan Jennings, Abbotsford, British Columbia