

Context/ Context/ Context

If you've ever tried to buy or sell a house, you've probably heard the most popular mantra in real estate: "Location, location, location." It simply means that identical houses can increase or decrease in value due to their physical location. It's the number one rule in real estate, and it's often the most overlooked.

The same sort of thing could be said about our efforts to interpret the Bible: "Location, location, location." Or, another way of putting it is: "Context, context, context." Edwin Crozier illustrates the principle by sharing the opening paragraph of a book entitled *Murder at Cory Mansion*.

A few minutes of stillness lingered at the Cory Mansion, when the night sounds were shattered by a woman's scream and an infant's cry. A few minutes later, as the clock in the hall struck 2:30, a man carrying a black leather handbag slipped quickly from the house, glanced up and down the street, and walked briskly away through the early morning mist.

What happened? Someone was clearly robbed and murdered in the middle of the night. Sadly, this someone probably had an infant. We certainly hope the sleuth in this mystery catches the bad guy.

The truth is, Edwin made the book and its opening paragraph up to illustrate a simple point. Look again at the same paragraph, but read it this time as the opening paragraph to a book entitled, *The Life and Times of Richard Cory*.

With that title, the opening paragraph has a completely different meaning, doesn't it? Instead of being a description of a murder, it's the documenting of a new baby being born. Instead of a murderer fleeing the crime scene, we can easily envision a doctor leaving a wealthy patient's home, hurrying to get some rest before having to go to work the next morning.

What changed? We read the exact same paragraph in both situations. But in each case, we interpreted the paragraph's meaning differently. Why? In each case, we were reading a different *kind* of book. We took into account the genre of writing. One was a mystery, the other a biographical narrative.

And that leads us to the point of this section of our study. In previous lessons we've noted that the Bible is precious and profitable. We've investigated the bedrock principle of authority and how we will either operate within the boundaries of law or be guilty of lawlessness. We've established the importance of distinguishing between the covenants of the Bible. In this lesson, we focus on the importance of distinguishing between the different genres that God used in his written revelation to mankind.

Gen-What?

From Genesis to Revelation, we run across different types of literature. In other words, the Bible isn't written in the same way from cover to cover. Almighty God saw fit to use different genres at different points in his progressive revelation. A *genre* is simply a category or class of communicating that uses specific styles or forms. This point is vital to understand because if we

read every part of the Bible in the same way, we're going to misunderstand and misapply the Scriptures. It doesn't take long to notice that the Psalms don't read or sound the same as the prophecy of Isaiah. Isaiah reads and sounds different than the Gospel of Matthew. We don't learn the same things in the same ways from Jesus' parable of the sower as we do the historical account of Noah in Genesis 6.

Perhaps you've heard the illustration of the man who randomly opened his Bible to Matthew 27.5--the account of Judas throwing down the pieces of silver he had gotten for betraying Jesus into the temple, departing, and hanging himself. The careless reader then haphazardly landed in Luke 10.37-Jesus' encouragement to "go, and do likewise." The reader frantically began flipping pages and his eyes came to rest on John 13.27-"What you are going to do, do quickly." He was nearly pushed over the edge when he fearfully and sloppily turned to Acts 22.16, only to find the question, "And now why do you wait?"

It's all right there in the Bible! But clearly, *how* we read the Bible matters. Context, context, context is everything! God used different kinds of communication at different points in history to different audiences in accordance with a perfectly executed plan to convey his unified message of redemption to mankind. Appreciating those facts is an indispensable aspect of "accurately handling" the word of truth (2 Tim 2.15).

Categories of Biblical Communication

Prose. We are most used to reading this "normal," matter-of-fact, straightforward type of communication. When it comes to prose, the author typically means what he says and says what he means. While prose can contain figures of speech, they rarely cause us any problems because they're obvious. When Paul wrote in Ephesians 4.28, "Let the thief no longer steal," we don't look for hidden or symbolic meaning. We take it at face value--followers of Jesus must not steal. That's prose.

Narrative. This form of prose tells a story. It documents the thoughts, actions, events, and circumstances of people. Narrative, as a form of prose, is straightforward. We don't typically look for hidden and symbolic meanings in narrative. But when it comes to the narrative accounts of the Bible, we're looking to do more than simply read the historical information. When we read about Cain and Abel in Genesis 4.1-8, we don't wonder what Cain and Abel represent, nor do we question what the sheep and the vegetables symbolize. Cain represents Cain and his vegetables are just that-vegetables. The same is true for Abel and his sheep. But we *can* learn more than just the historical facts. In accounts like that of Cain and Abel, we can discern principles for how *we* ought to live in relation to God. We learn that we must do things God's way. We learn that God cares about what we do and how we react. We learn that we mustn't murder. If we read this story just like the prose of Ephesians 4.28, we would learn what happened between Cain and Abel, but we wouldn't learn practical principles of application. We must consider the genre.

Poetry. This is where things begin to get a little tricky for most of us. Hebrew poetry didn't necessarily rely on rhyming sounds and metrical reading like classical English poetry. Rather, Hebrew poetry often relied on what some have called "rhyming thoughts." Consider Psalm 140.4-5.

Guard me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked;
preserve me from violent men,

who have planned to trip up my feet.
The arrogant have hidden a trap for me,
and with cords they have spread a net;
beside the way they have set snares for me.

The words don't rhyme (for one, they're translated from Hebrew into English), but the content is parallel. The problem we have with Biblical poetry is that it's often highly figurative and symbolic. When we read it, we know full well that we may not be able to take it at face value. We have to consider a deeper meaning than what is right there on the surface. For instance, take David's plea to God in Psalm 51.7-8.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

We know David isn't saying that all he needs is for God to rub a hyssop branch all over him. David is employing the imagery of a Jewish priest who would make a defiled house clean by using a hyssop branch that had been dipped in the blood of a sacrifice. David feels the intense need to be cleansed of sin's defilement and he uses highly figurative language to poetically express that need to God. We can also deduce that David isn't talking about bones that God had literally broken. Instead, David is expressing his profound guilt in very vivid and painful terms. The point? If we read poetry the same way we read prose or narrative-or vice versa-we will misunderstand the meaning of significant Bible passages.

Proverb. Of course, this genre is used most frequently in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. However, there are proverbs in other places as well (i.e. Ezekiel 18.2). Proverbs are often poetical, using couplets and rhyming ideas to make their point. But the reason we need to view these as a separate genre is because proverbs are rarely to be read as absolutes. Typically, they are maxims-general truths that contain weighty advice. Therefore, while Proverbs 15.1 reads ...

A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

... we don't accuse God of lying when we're dealing with someone who is irrationally irate and constantly angry with us, regardless of how softly we speak to him. The same point applies to Proverbs 22.6.

Train up a child in the way he should go;
even when he is old he will not depart from it.

If an adult child chooses to turn away from the Biblical instruction he or she consistently and lovingly received from his or her parents, we don't abandon the Bible as a book of lies and false promises. Proverbs 22.6 is a wise maxim-a general truth that contains weighty advice.

Parables. Like narrative, this form of writing tells a story. And yet, while narrative is simply about whatever happened, parables are designed to convey spiritual meaning beyond what is actually written. When we read narrative, we don't have to wonder what objects and people represent. In parables, we do. In Matthew 13.3-9, Jesus told the parable of the sower, and he even clarified its much deeper meaning in Matthew 13.18-23. His words had a much more profound point than a simple observation about different kinds of ground. It was a commentary, warning, and encouragement about the differing conditions of the human heart and its receptiveness to the gospel. Sometimes the Bible explains the deeper meaning of parables in detail; sometimes we simply read the parables and depend upon further study to discern the deeper meaning (e.g. Luke 16.1-12). But if we read parables just like narratives, we'll be left wondering, "What does this have to do with anything?" If we read narratives like parables, we'll over-spiritualize everything and come up with significantly unfounded ideas.

Prophecy. In general terms, prophecies are communications from a spokesman about things that have not yet happened, but will happen at some point in the future. Some prophecies in the Bible were written in a very straightforward manner. They foretold that something was going to happen and even elaborated with details. Consider God's promise in Joel 2.28-29.

"And it shall come to pass afterward,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.
Even on the male and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit."

On the other hand, some prophecies were highly symbolic, using past history and iconic images to describe future events. Consider Isaiah 2.2-3, which uses common Jewish imagery to describe the coming kingdom of the Christ that would be established more than 700 years later.

"It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."

Not all prophecy was limited to the Old Testament. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2.19). Jesus used the temple in Jerusalem as a figure to prophetically foretell his own death and resurrection.

Another device often used in prophecy is what is often referred to as "prophetic certainty." God, wanting his people to know how certain his promises for the future were, sometimes spoke of them as if they had already occurred. Isaiah 53 spoke of the coming Messiah as if he had already lived and died. However, this was written 700 years before Jesus walked the earth.

There is much that could be said about prophecy, but fundamentally, we need to realize that we don't read prophecy like we read narrative, prose, poetry or parable. If we do, we're bound to misunderstand and misapply the Scriptures.

Apocalyptic. While we are typically very unfamiliar with this kind of writing, it wasn't foreign to the ancient Hebrews and Christians. They didn't have as much trouble as we do with books like Ezekiel, Zechariah and Revelation because they had read other books written in the same style. Apocalyptic literature was often employed during times of great stress and duress in the ancient world. For Jews of the Old Testament and Christians of the New, apocalyptic language was -used as a highly symbolic and exciting way to explain that in the end, God was going to win and win big. That's the main point behind every apocalyptic book of the Bible-no matter how bad things look, God wins and you want to be on his side.

In some ways, reading their ancient apocalyptic literature is like watching one of our movies. As we watch an old Western, when we see a cowboy in a white hat, we automatically know he's a good guy. The point of nearly all Westerns is that you want to be a good guy, because in the end, the good guys win. We don't spend an inordinate amount of time wondering what the horses symbolize or why the tumbleweeds blew across the road at the angle that they did. We don't wonder why the hero fired ten shots from a six-shot pistol. We naturally take the picture in as a whole. We don't break it down into its tiniest parts and insist on figuring out a meaning for each detail.

In the same way, consider Ezekiel 1. As we read of Ezekiel's incredible vision by the River Chebar, we should guard against missing the overall point because of an excessive fixation on the various faces and wings and colors and wheels. The intensely graphic language is used to overwhelmingly convey the awesome, powerful, glorious nature of the Lord (Ezek 1.28).

Apocalyptic literature also frequently uses numbers in a highly symbolic and figurative way. In Daniel 9, for instance, when the angel Gabriel told Daniel about 70 weeks in which God was going to accomplish several amazing parts of his plan, we shouldn't expect to find fulfillment in 70 literal weeks. Nor do we have to come up with some arbitrary "a-day-equals-a-year-theory" to make the number seem literal. Instead, we note that 70 is the combination of two numbers that often represented fullness and completeness in the ancient world (7 and 10). Thus, Gabriel was communicating to Daniel that God would accomplish all these things when the time was right. Obviously, we don't have the time or the space to go over every aspect of the symbolism of apocalyptic literature, but what we *can* see is that we should avoid reading these writings in the same way that we read poetry, parable or prose. We need to read it as its own genre; otherwise, we're going to misunderstand and misapply it.

Some Simple Guidelines for Honest Bible Study

Appreciate and keep scriptures in their context. Taking something "in context" literally means to take it "with text." That is, we determine a statement's meaning based on the text around it. Psalm 14.1 plainly reads, "There is no God," but it has a context that needs to be noted! Take the time to read the paragraph before and after (at the very least) a specific statement in the Bible to accurately appreciate its intended meaning.

Beyond the immediate context, continue to grow in your grasp of the overall context of God's word. What has he revealed about this matter in other portions of the Bible? "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3.16-17). If my interpretation of one passage in God's book contradicts another passage in God's book, the problem is not with God's book, but with my interpretation. As the psalmist wrote in Psalm 119.160, "The sum of your word is truth."

John 3.16 is known by more people worldwide than perhaps any other verse. Many have based their entire understanding of God's nature and mankind's salvation on this one verse. However, God has said much more in his book about love (1 Cor 13.4-7; 1 John 4) and faith (Heb 11; James 2) than the one sentence in John 3.16. Those passages don't contradict John 3.16, but they profoundly deepen our understanding of what Jesus meant in John 3.16. We desperately need to discover and apply what God has revealed about the multiple aspects of his character (Rom 11.22) and the elements of our response to his offer of grace (Rom 10.9-10; Acts 2.38). The sum of God's word is truth.

Grow in your appreciation of the harmony of the Scriptures. In 2 Corinthians 1.17-18, Paul wanted to make sure that Christians understood a foundational principle.

Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No.

In 1 Corinthians 4.17, he asserted that he taught the same ways of Christ everywhere in every church. God's message-regardless of who is speaking and to whom it is being spoken-is consistent, unified, and harmonious. Again, if my understanding of one passage contradicts my understanding of another, it's me who is making a mistake somewhere.

I need to be careful, therefore, about jumping to shallow interpretations of any passage of Scripture without harmonizing it with everything I know about other statements in God's book. My understanding of John 3.16 must harmonize with passages like Romans 10.9-10 and Acts 2.38. One passage says we need to believe. Another says we need to believe and confess. Yet another says we need to repent and be baptized for the remission of our sins. If I use one passage against the others, I'm missing the point. My understanding should be shaped by a harmony of everything God has said on the matter. When I understand that the faith Jesus describes in John 3.16 is not just "mental assent," but true conviction that produces a response, I can discern the natural place of confession, repentance, and baptism. "The sum" of God's word "is truth."

Allow the simple to define and clarify the complex. Learning God's will to the best of my ability is an ongoing process that involves progressive growth.

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation- if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Pet 2.1-3)

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of

God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. (Heb. 5.12-6.3)

There is nothing wrong and everything right with working from the simple and shallow toward the complex and deep. That being the case, let's remember that the complex and deep issues of Scripture will never come back to rewrite the foundational principles- of the faith.

As even the apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3.15-16, there are some passages of Scripture that are "hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction." While the exact meaning of some verses or chapters may continue to be debated, we can be steadfastly certain of what they *cannot* mean because of some of the simpler, more straightforward statements in God's book.

For instance, Revelation 20.4 speaks of martyred saints reigning with Christ for a thousand years. I have some strong ideas regarding what that passage means. However, I'm not convinced that I flawlessly understand this verse or even the entire chapter. And yet, at the same time, I'm absolutely convinced of some things Revelation 20 *cannot* be saying. It can't be saying that Jesus is coming to the earth some time in our future to establish an earthly kingdom. Why? Other simpler, more straightforward passages forbid that interpretation.

- In John 18.36, Jesus said that his kingdom was not of this world.
- In Mark 9.1 he said that some who were standing there would not "taste death" until they saw "the kingdom of God" after it had come with power.
- Colossians 1.13 says that Christians are already delivered into Christ's kingdom.
- In Revelation 1.9, John indicates that he and his readers were companions in the kingdom.

Why, then, would he say in Revelation 20 that the kingdom would be established thousands of years later? His words must mean something else. We certainly continue to study Revelation 20, but allowing the simple to define the complex helps us to narrow the path a great deal.

We must remember that we are always growing. Some Bible students come across difficult passages and decide that if they don't understand them, there must be no understanding them. They leave the faith, claiming the Bible can't be trusted. If we're still growing, as 2 Peter 1.5-11 demonstrates we must be, then we're going to find issues that are hard to understand. So we simply keep studying God's word. The greater the foundation we progressively develop, the greater the potential for eventual answers to our questions. If we ever forget that we're growing, we close ourselves off to the growth, correction and discipline God's word can provide.

When you pick up your Bible, do your best to read it with eager eyes, a willing attitude and a receptive heart. Approach it with the posture of a student who is anxious to grow in his understanding, be corrected in his misconceptions, and galvanized in his convictions.

Questions for Growth and Discussion

1. In your own words, what is "context" and why is keeping God's written revelation in its appropriate context so vital to sound interpretation?
2. In 2 Timothy 2.15, Paul encouraged young Timothy: "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." Are there any aspects of that encouragement that apply to us today? If so, what are they, and how can we step up to meet them?
3. Find two or three examples of **prose** in the Scriptures and summarize-in your own words-what prose is.
4. Find two or three examples of **narrative** in the Scriptures and summarize-in your own words-what narrative is.
5. Find two or three examples of **poetry** in the Scriptures and summarize-in your own words-what poetry is.
6. Find two or three examples of **proverbs** in the Scriptures and summarize-in your own words-what proverbs are.
7. Find two or three examples of **parables** in the Scriptures and summarize-in your own words-what parables are.
8. Find two or three examples of **prophecy** in the Scriptures and summarize-in your own words-what prophecy is.
9. Find two or three examples of **apocalyptic** language in the Scriptures and summarize-in your own words-what apocalyptic language is.
10. Can you give an example or two of a section or principle of Scripture where it has been helpful for you to allow the simple to define and clarify the complex?