

Considering the Context

Definition of Context: “The part of a text or statement that surrounds a particular word or passage and determines its meaning”
(The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition)

One of the most critical elements to Bible study is understanding the context of a particular passage or section of scripture. Notice in the definition above, we are told that understanding the context is what “determines its meaning.” When we fail to take context into consideration, it can lead to all kinds of religious error. In this lesson, we will consider the importance of context in our daily study and specifically learn how to correctly interpret scripture by considering the context of what we read.

One of the most common mistakes made in the religious world today, is taking a passage out of context and trying to prove something spiritually. One example of this is the idea that all we must do to be saved is to believe in Jesus. People will turn to John 3:16, where the verse by itself seems to support exactly what they are saying, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” What they fail to consider is the context of the verses around this passage. Read verses 1-21 in this chapter and ask yourself the following questions: Who is Jesus speaking to? What is the nature of his discussion with him? What question does he ask Nicodemus in verse 12? What does Jesus say about those who do and do not believe in Jesus? When we answer these questions from the context of verses 1-21, we see that Jesus is talking about belief as a foundational part of our faith. He is not saying that all we have to do is believe, but that salvation starts with belief. Also, we are taught that if we do not believe, then there is nothing else we can do to be saved because we are condemned (verse 18). The principle Jesus is teaching here goes along with what is said in Hebrews 11:6, “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” If we do not believe in Jesus, then repentance, baptism and being faithful is not possible because we are already condemned. This is why we must consider the context of passages around John 3:16 before we draw conclusions about what the verse is teaching.

Immediate Context and Remote Context

Sometimes you will hear the terms “Immediate context” and “Remote context” in connection with the principle of considering context. Immediate context are the passages surrounding a given verse like we considered in the example of John 3:16. Remote context is much broader and can include something like the entire New Testament. For instance, we know the immediate context of Mark 16:16 is about belief and baptism but the remote context of passages such as Acts 2:38 and Romans 10:10 teach us that repentance and confession are also key elements of salvation. Sometimes we need to consider both types of context in our study.

Other Types of Context (partial list from Bible.ca web site)

There are also a few other types of contexts in the Bible that we should consider:

1. The Historical context: this is the time factor, the dispensation and events that have some bearing on the passage.

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- 2. The Cultural context: there are certain words, expressions and sayings that are best understood in their cultural context. Many statements in the New Testament have a Jewish cultural context.
- 3. The Geographic context: this brings into your study any pertinent geographic facts.
- 4. The Personal context: the people mentioned in the context; their attitude; sins; qualities or circumstances that bear upon the passage.

We could certainly go more in-depth on this subject but the key point is that we must do everything we can to correctly interpret God's word. When we consider the context, it helps us to better understand the meaning of a specific passage or a group of passages.

Questions (Remember to consult your study aids)

1. Read 1 Corinthians 1:13 and answer the following questions: What other passages around this one should you read to determine why Paul makes this statement? _____
What is the main point that Paul is making here? _____

2. Why is it important to consider the context when studying the scriptures? _____

3. What can happen when we draw conclusions from one passage without considering the context of the passages around it? _____

4. What is the difference between "Immediate context" and "Remote context?" _____

5. What is the Personal and Geographic context of Romans 1:1-7? _____

6. What is the Cultural context of the book of Matthew? Why was the genealogy important to the people being addressed? _____

7. In 1 Corinthians 14:1 it says, "Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy." Does this apply to us today? How would you prove this from the context? _____

8. If someone told you "all you have to do to be saved is believe as we are taught in John 3:16." How would you respond? What could you teach them from the Immediate and Remote context? _____

9. What was the Cultural context of the statement made to Jesus by the woman at the well in John 4:9? List the source(s) for your answer. _____

10. What are at least three spiritual lessons we can we learn from the context of Acts 2:42-47? _____