

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE III

Context of the Bible as a Whole

Review

A third rule of contextual interpretation is to consider the passage in its relation to the whole Bible. Because the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament are all "chapters" of one book, those who want to live by the whole counsel of God need increasingly to be able to see each individual part in light of the whole.

The many perspectives of the whole Bible cannot be quickly mastered. Gathering and combining the insights of the whole Bible is the process of a lifetime. This is one reason the Bible says that God gives pastors and teachers to His people. Those who know more than we do about the Bible can help us to balance our understanding of individual passages with complementing perspectives.

Lets look at the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness and see how important it is to be able to interpret one passage in the light of another (context of the Bible as a whole).

Example 1: Read Matthew 4: 1-10

Satan quoted from a messianic section of Psalm 91: 11,12 which says "He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. They will lift you up in their hands so you will not strike your foot against a stone" - if you throw yourself down (like a superman) from the highest point of the temple.

- What strategy did the devil use in tempting Jesus? In these verses, how did Christ use the Bible itself to respond to temptation?
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- Can you regard every quote from the Scripture as scriptural in light of the devil's attempt to quote from Scriptures?
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- In considering the context of the Bible as a whole, what else does the Bible have to say about how we should respond to temptation?
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Going Further

- What does Matthew 4: 1-7 teach us about using the Bible as a defense against temptation? Following Jesus' pattern, what strategy can you develop from Scripture for resisting temptation in your own life?
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- Is it right for us to arrange circumstances in such a way as to attempt to force God's hand of provision?
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Jesus replied by quoting Moses, indicating that it was not right for a man to wilfully put God to the test.

- Explain Mark 16:18. Does it mean we should be looking for snakes and deadly poison all over the place in order to validate the text?
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Let's examine what is "also written" about our spiritual enemy?

While some sections of the bible seem to leave the impression that Satan is no longer a threat to us, other parts of Scripture show us that in some ways we have power over him, and in some ways we don't.

- Compare James 4:7, 1 John 4:4, Matthew 10: 1 (passages that seem to leave the impression that Satan is no longer a threat to us)

with

1 Peter 5:8, Jude 9, Revelation 20:2

(passages that leave the impression that we don't have power over the devil). What is your take on Satan's power and our position in the conflict?

- Can you remember a time when you were quoted out of context? How did it happen? How did you feel when you learned of it? What were the consequences?
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Thinking Through

- Referring to the 66 books of the bible, the following statement is made "Those who want to live by the whole counsel of God need increasingly to be able to see each individual part in light of the whole." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
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Four Essentials for finding Truth in Context

While interpreting the bible according to the rule of context, there are some timeless considerations that need to be kept in mind (see graphics on next page).

Dependence on God

The author of Psalm 119 reminded us of the role God can have in our Bible study. He prayed, "Open my eyes, that I may see wonderful things in Your law" (v.18). His confidence in God's ability to help is similar to what the apostle Paul expressed when he wrote, "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Timothy 2:7).

A Good Conscience

A bad conscience creates a conflict of interest for the Bible student. Those with unconfessed sin, and therefore something to hide, are predisposed to avoid the truth. They are out of step with God, who has promised understanding to those who, by obedience, keep a good conscience. (Matthew 5:8; John 14:21).

Self-study

Christians of the New Testament community of Berea are an example for all of us. They searched the Scriptures to make sure that what the apostle Paul was telling them was true (Acts 17:11). Without personal involvement, the Scriptures remain second-hand pre-digested, and subject to the accuracy of the teacher.

Use of Gifted Teachers

Teachers are a gift from God (Ephesians 4:11). Along with self-study, they can provide a depth and breadth of contextual knowledge. For the new believer, they provide orientation; for the mature believer, reminders. (2 Peter 1: 12-13).

Now, once again, we see how these four essentials fit into the diagram. These four considerations surround our study with a cycle of appropriate dependence combined with integrity.

