

Introduction

*When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know
but do not always know what we see.*

—Unknown

Context Matters

For the past 30 years I have been teaching God's Word trying my best to be one who is *accurately handling the word of truth*.¹ During that time, I have repeatedly been woken up to the realization that I was missing something important. The first such awakening occurred in 1988 when I had the opportunity to go to Israel on a study program. Until then, I never knew how important the land – its historical, cultural, geographic and literary context – was to understanding the purpose and meaning of many of the Gospel passages.



Missing a Framework

Not too long ago I again realized something important was missing in my teaching of God's Word. This time it was discovering that I was teaching the facts of the Scripture without providing a facilitating framework into which to organize and integrate them. It was as if I was handing out Christmas ornaments of wonderful biblical truths and facts but never showed people the tree upon which to hang them. From a contextual perspective, these facts and truths were all necessary for understanding a particular portion of Scripture being opened up but insufficient for allowing the whole picture to be seen, let alone grasped.

Missing the Big Picture

I recognized that my own journey of being taught was comprised of others giving me hundreds of pieces to a puzzle, without one of them ever showing me what the picture on the top of the puzzle box looked like. If you ever tried to assemble a 1,000-piece puzzle without ever having seen the top of the puzzle box, you understand how difficult a task this is. I soon learned that I was not alone in this experience. Furthermore, I was

teaching people in the same way that I had been taught. Missing, until recently, were frameworks for helping all of us better understand the Bible.

Seeing the Trees But not the Forest

Here in the West we are so preoccupied with analyzing a leaf (a statement of Jesus) under the microscope that we tend to forget that the leaf came from a tree (the Gospels), and that the tree is part of a great forest (all of Scripture). As a result, we can become so easily focused on the leaf issues of a passage that we often lose sight of its larger contextual background – the tree and the forest.

Finding a Different Perspective

What we often need when engaging the Scriptures is an elevated perspective on the text, a different and wider frame of reference, one where we can take in all the trees and see the whole forest. If we do that, then we can return to a specific passage to examine more closely the leaves that we thought we knew and understood and discover more of what we may have been missing. This is the approach we will take in opening up Jesus' encounters with people.

Three Levels of Context

In engaging Gospel passages within their context, it helps to always keep three perspectives in view:

- **The BIBLE'S Context** – “The Five Story Lines of Scripture”² or the really Big Picture of the Bible. From this 30,000 foot perspective, we first look for what is revealed in any biblical passage about 1) who God is and how He does things, 2) who the Adversary is and how he does things, 3) the character of the Mutiny, 4) the resultant nature of the Human Condition, and 5) God's eternal plan of

Rescue and Restoration to return everything back to its original sinless condition.

- **The BOOK'S Context** – Those contextual themes that the Gospel writer has already been developing in his narrative, e.g., the Rescuer has come, He is establishing a new Kingdom, He is beginning to remake His disciples' worldview, and He is bringing God's mercy to those who have been deprived of it. This is the book-specific perspective from 5,000 feet that we also need to “see” and understand.
- **The PASSAGE'S Context** – Look for the specific contextual clues that the Gospel writer (a Holy Spirit inspired artist with words) gives us by using names, phrases, sites, references, and idioms to “paint” this encounter. This is the ground-level view of a passage. Let's explore this ground-level perspective further.

Words have very precise meanings in Scripture. That's why the biblical writers deliberately chose their words under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to communicate an intentional message. In the Gospels, insights into these word meanings include the³

- **Literary context** of the words used including their Jewish literary form, their linguistic meaning and their use in rabbinic teaching pedagogy.
- **Historical context** they were rooted in, including the intertestamental and Roman occupation periods, as well as Israel's own extensive history.
- **Geographical context** of the sites mentioned including their physical characteristics, topographical and climatic features, as well as the extreme geographical variations that exist in this very small land.

- **Religious context** they were drawn from including the nature of the Temple, Sabbath worship, the Oral Tradition, rabbinic interpretive wisdom, Messianic themes and prophecy, as well as ceremonial feasts and ritual purification.
- **Village context** issues including Jewish social customs of mandatory hospitality and social reciprocity, as well as the nature of farming, shepherding and fishing life.

Such an *integrated* contextual approach allows us to get closer to what the biblical writers intended to communicate about who God is and what God wants to reveal to us in these encounters with Jesus.

How Do You Read It?

At the beginning of the “Good Samaritan” story,⁴ Luke tells us that a certain lawyer came to test Jesus. This confident lawyer initiates his dialogue with Jesus by posing a great question: *Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* In true rabbinic fashion, Jesus answers his question with another question: *What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?*

Since this lawyer had memorized the Hebrew (Old Testament) Scriptures for his *bar mitzvah*, the nature of Jesus’ *How does it read to you?* question is not meant to ask him what does God’s Word say; rather, what does it mean? In other words, how do you interpret God’s Word regarding your question of eternal life?

Biblical Illiteracy

Jesus’ *How does it read to you?* (how do you interpret it?) question is the challenge of this book. Over twenty centuries later, that question still confronts us. How are we reading God’s Word today? Through what kinds of cultural filters, worldview grids and lenses are we reading,

massaging and/or altering God’s word so as to make it more palatable to our Western paradigms and personal comfort zones?

Our contemporary situation is radically different from Jesus’ time. Unlike the first century, biblical illiteracy, not proficiency, is epidemic throughout the evangelical church. As a result, we now have at least two core questions to ask followers of Jesus Christ today: What does God’s Word say (a content question), and then what does God’s Word mean (an interpretation question)? When we read and ponder the Scriptures, do we understand the content of what the Holy Spirit, the author of God’s Word, intends for us to see and understand? Then, are we able to recognize the implications of that timeless content for today?

Words Have Meaning

Before the Gospels were written down on scrolls, they were first spoken in a Semitic language that embodied well-known paradigms (ways of thinking, seeing and understanding things) that Jewish listeners knew well. As such, those words had very specific meanings within the Hebrew mindset of its day. Since then, those Hebrew words have been translated into Greek, then into Latin, and then into the constraints of the English language more than a thousand years later. Thus, a needed perspective for engaging a text or passage is to first disconnect from our traditional Hellenistic (Greek) way of thinking – easier said than done – and then ask how the Hebrews who first heard those words would have understood them.

Original Meaning

This process of sequentially disconnecting from our Western way of thinking to engage the world of the Gospels, and then reconnecting to our

modern way of thinking is crucial. If we miss the original meaning embodied in those Holy Spirit inspired words, it then becomes relatively easy to not only misunderstand those words, but to redefine them and then misapply them. As part of the process of discovering the original intent of the Bible writers' words, we must remember that this disconnect-engage-reconnect process is not always an easy one for today's Westerners:

For many of us Westerners, the Hebrew mindset is so strange, so alien, so impossible to fathom, that we quickly snap back into the comfort zone of the Hellenistic mold of studying the Hebrew Scriptures. We then impose this distorting grid over the Hebrew text – or for that matter, over the Greek text of the New Testament.⁵

Synthesis or Analysis

Not only have we in the West been conditioned by a Greek worldview for 2,000+ years, but we have also been shaped by 300 years of modernity thinking.⁶ This has taken its toll and made us egocentric people who instinctively prefer instant analysis and “how to” answers when engaging the Scriptures. We are also much more comfortable tearing things apart than we are fusing and keeping things together. As a result, we like to label the analytical pieces we create, convincing ourselves that in putting these pieces into the right cubbyholes means we have actually mastered them. For example, being able to list and organize sixteen attributes of God may mean we know something *about* God, but it does not necessarily follow that we actually *know* God. All of this stands in stark contrast to the Hebrew perspective, which was always about synthesis and integration, i.e., keeping things together when wrestling with the Word of God.

Existentialism is Alive and Well

Sadly, existentialism (what a passage means to me is the only thing that matters) is not only very much alive and well in evangelicalism, it is flourishing in both subtle and not so subtle ways. For example, a very common response I get before leading a “Bible Alive” contextual immersion weekend in a church (where we engage the Bible in its context) is, “Who needs this?” The preferred evangelical existential approach to God's Word often seems to be some form of “I just open my Bible each day to a verse or passage and let the Spirit speak to me.” While we would not dare learn physics, nursing, or astronomy that way, we do seem to have this peculiar way of approaching and reading the Bible!

Unaware that we are often pragmatic existentialists, we are not looking for the original meaning of a passage. It is not part of our thinking that the Holy Spirit had something very specific in mind to communicate to us in a timeless manner when inspiring those particular words in the text. Thus we unknowingly rely on the Holy Spirit to work overtime on our behalf to reveal God's intended wisdom to us in the passage because we are too lazy to work at discovering what the Holy Spirit's original meaning is in the text. And then we wonder why we find mostly anemic Christians sitting limply in the pew.

Discerning Purpose and Meaning

Without the plumb line of the Holy Spirit's original meaning for a passage, we are left with only two possible outcomes when approaching the Word of God, both woefully deficient. Either the Holy Spirit had nothing specific in mind when He inspired the words we are reading or; if He

did, we are incapable of discerning what that intent is. While it is a fine line, and I'm certainly not trying to create a new specialized body of knowledge in suggesting this, I am convinced it is necessary for us to do the best we can to try and discern the Holy Spirit's timeless intent for any passage we are studying. With that understanding in place, we are then in a much better position to ask the Spirit for discernment regarding the purpose and meaning of that passage for the complexities of our life and world today.

“What Do You Think it Means?”

In the world of the Gospels, the rabbi had the role of authoritatively interpreting the Scriptures for his disciples. Today the reader of God's Word, not always under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, frequently assumes that role. Because of the widespread biblical illiteracy that is often part of this dynamic, the implications can be unsettling.

Have you ever been in a small group Bible study when a seemingly difficult passage is discussed? The typical question that the leader often sets in motion is, “What do you think it means?” That is certainly a good question. However, it is the response to that question that should give us cause for concern! Often, as that question migrates around the room and each person renders his or her opinion, that process ends with a straw vote to determine the best answer! While this may be good representative democracy, it is a dubious approach, at best, to understanding God's Word.

Unaware that we are often practicing existentialists, we tend to focus on what we think or guess a passage might mean rather than digging more deeply to discern what the Holy Spirit intended it to mean. Then we wonder why we end up looking so much like clones of the

culture, very much at home in our “comfortable self-centeredness,”⁷ instead of distinctive disciples of Jesus.

There is Work to Be Done!

Not too long ago while reading A.W. Pink's commentary on Exodus, I was challenged in my thinking about studying God's Word. Pink makes the observation in one of his chapters that “the Bible does not yield its meaning to lazy people.”⁸ Oh my! It's as if we have become too lethargic or complacent to want to do the work that is necessary to dig more deeply into the riches of God's Word. Paul's exhortation to *Be diligent to present yourself approved by God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth*⁹ appears to be missing from our consciousness. Note the presupposition of work! So we dabble in our understanding of the Scriptures, quickly investing two minutes on power¹⁰ in our microwave approach to studying God's Word, and then collectively meet and share our what-do-you-think-it-means superficial opinions.

Some Convincing Examples

To underscore these preceding observations and to illustrate both the power and the necessity of understanding the context of the passages we read in the Scriptures, this book takes twelve “familiar” Gospel passages from Luke and contextually restores them. Doing so allows us to understand the passages as if we were those Middle Eastern villagers who first heard and understood them.

For Pulpit and Pew

It is my belief that people in the pew can do what this book does – namely restore much of the context of a biblical passage. That's what Preserving Bible Time's Bible-in-Context church

weekends are all about – giving people the tools, frameworks and resources to meaningfully reconstruct the context of a passage.

It is important to accept the premise that this contextual restoration process is not something that should be confined just to ministry professionals. The ability to contextually restore much of a passage was always meant for the pew – the priesthood of all believers.¹⁰ After all, it was “lay people” who first heard the Bible’s words and understood those meanings. As such, it is important to remember that the sources providing the contextual facts used in this book are available to the priesthood of all believers. The last thing I would want you the reader to conclude is: “I can’t do this. This is too hard.” Yes, it requires some digging and perseverance to find contextual facts; however, that digging will be done if you are convinced of the value of mining God’s Word. Doing things differently always starts with seeing things differently. Such an effort can profoundly deepen your love affair with the Father and His Son. It can also re-energize your spiritual life and journey.

Consider again Paul’s admonition to young Timothy: *Be diligent to present yourself approved by God as a workman who does not need to be*

*ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.*¹¹

That would certainly suggest there must be a number of ways to inaccurately handle God’s Truth. Are you ready to work at further understanding God’s Word? Are you willing to be your own version of a biblical explorer in passionate pursuit for understanding more of the riches to be found in God’s word just below the surface of a passage? If so, grab some shovels and let’s start contextually digging.

Take Time to Reflect

Appropriate “Reflections to Journal and Share,” as well as some thoughts to “Ponder,” will be found at the end of each chapter. In the spirit of the first-century rabbinic tradition, you will find no fill-in-the-blank questions; rather, thought-provoking questions to wrestle with to further hone your discernment regarding the intended purpose and meaning of God’s Word for your life today.

For small groups and Bible studies, these guided thoughts can serve as helpful discussion questions with which to collectively wrestle. For devotional purposes, they can serve as a guide for personal meditation and journaling. The prayed-for outcomes of both are the same – personal and corporate transformation by the Holy Spirit.

Reflections to Journal and Share...

- What do you think twenty centuries of Greek thinking and three hundred years of modernity thinking has done to the way we approach the Gospels in the West? What kinds of thinking patterns and processing filters might we implicitly be bringing to reading about Jesus in the Gospels without realizing it?

- Are we often unaware that we are using an existentialist mindset (the only thing that matters is what a passage means to me) when we read God's word? What implications might that have for you, your Bible study and your church?
- What issues and implications do you see for people in today's Westernized industrial, urban culture reading biblical words that have first-century Middle Eastern village, agrarian meanings?
- Would you agree or disagree with the thesis that you have to work at studying God's Word? What is your notion of what that work means? Are you willing to do it?
- What is your prayer right now as you prepare to rediscover these "familiar" passages?

Ponder...

O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day

—Psalm 119:99

*I remember the days of old;
I meditate on all Your doings;
I muse on the work of Your hands.*

—Psalm 143:5

Reading the Bible through fresh eyes constantly reminds us
of the depths that still remain to be discovered there.

—Philip Jenkins

In the midst of the cultural obsession with expertise, it is essential that
the Christian life should be preserved with its proper amateur status.

—James Houston

Faith may be exercised without a jar to the moral life and without embarrassment to the
Adamic ego. Christ may be “received” without the creating of any special love for Him in the
soul of the receiver. The man is “saved,” but he is not hungry nor thirsty after God. In fact, he
is specifically taught to be satisfied and is encouraged to be content with very little.

—A. W. Tozer

The Third Gospel is not simply a narrative text, but a “cultural product.” That is, as literary
text, the Gospel of Luke is itself a representation of the values and contexts within which
it was generated, so any attempt to dislodge the Gospel from its own world would render
it in some ways incomprehensible...All language is embedded in culture, and because
Luke’s narrative enterprise will have been set within a particular discourse situation, it
behooves modern interpreters to engage as fully as possible in an exploration of the cultural
presuppositions Luke shared with his contemporaries.

—Joel Green

Sources and Notes

¹II Timothy 2:15

²James C. Martin and Doug Greenwold, from the Pentagon graphic, “The Five Story Lines of Scripture,” as used in Preserving Bible Times’ “Bible-in-Context” seminars, 2003.

³Preserving Bible Times website www.preservingbibletimes.org, “Role of Context.”

⁴Luke 10:25-26

⁵Brian Knowles, *The Hebrew Mind vs The Western Mind* (website godward.com under “Hebrew Root Studies,” “Study Papers and Feature Articles” category, September 1999).

⁶Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass: A Wiley Company, San Francisco, California, 2003), pp. 106, 116, & 120.

⁷Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (The Seabury Press: Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1981), p. 13.

⁸A. W. Pink, *Gleanings From Exodus* (Moody Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1981), p. 327.

⁹II Timothy 2:15

¹⁰I Peter 2:9

¹¹II Timothy 2:15