**Principles of Interpretations: Context**

**Introduction:**

Paul told young Timothy in II Timothy 2:15 that to meet God’s approval, he must “rightly divide the word of truth” to interpret accurately and correctly. It is possible to so misinterpret or twist the Scriptures that spiritual destruction is our end. (II Timothy 2:15) “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” NKJV (II Peter 3:14-16) “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation – as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” NKJV So we see clearly that it is not enough to just know the Scriptures, we must reason correctly from them. We must properly interpret their message. Use common sense. An excellent example of this lack of proper reasoning is that of many 1st Century Jews. The evidence was there in the Old Testament Scriptures. They had all the facts that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Yet most did not recognize or accept Him. They were responsible. Jesus told them their problem. “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about a Me.” John 5:46 No, just being acquainted with the Word isn’t sufficient; one must understand it.

**Aim:** To examine the importance of context Example: in understanding the Scriptures The context is the most important principle in interpreting a Bible passage.

**Body:**

1. **The Canonical Context** This is the context of the entire Bible. We must understand the difference between various covenants given in the Bible. Without understanding who they were given to, you don’t know if you are accountable to that covenant or not. Are we required to build an ark as Noah was? No. That covenant was between God and Noah. One of the greatest mistakes in the religious world is failure to understand the Law of Moses was temporary and is not now, nor will it ever be again, in effect. It accomplished its purpose and has been done away with.

(Ephesians 2:13-15) “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace.” NKJV (Colossians 2:13-14) “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” NKJV Thus those of us alive today are not required to offer animal sacrifices, observe the Sabbath . . . So whenever we read in the Bible a command, we must determine if it applies to us, which covenant it was given under. Critical!

1. **Immediate Context** This is textual information that precedes and follows the verse under consideration. Be careful about chapter divisions. They were put there my men, not God. They can mislead. An example of this is seen in Romans 12:19-21. “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine. I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” NKJV One might assume that such things as capital punishment or even a police force is wrong. One must read Romans 13:1-4. “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.” NKJV We read that government is ordained by God and is authorized by God to avenge those who break the law. So be careful about chapter divisions. Another example of importance of studying immediate context is Colossians 2:21. “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” NKJV Without reading verses before and after, many have erroneously concluded he is discussing things a Christian should abstain from such as alcohol and drugs. Other verses, though, do! (Colossians 2:20, 22) “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations - 22 which all concern things which perish with the using – according to the commandments and doctrines of men?” NKJV But after reading verses 20 and 22, it is seen that he is talking primarily about those regulations under the Old Law concerning food and what was clean and unclean, which are no longer binding, as well as new religions of the 1st Century, concocted by men, which told them they were to deny themselves certain things which God told them was OK. The immediate context is so critical to proper interpretation.
2. **Remote Context** This includes the rest of the book you are studying, other books written by the same writer, [helps you understand how he uses the same words and phrases elsewhere], as well as all the entire Bible has to say on the same subject! A concordance or topical Bible is very useful. Example: I John 3:9 “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.” Many in the religious world teach that a child of God cannot sin. It is impossible to so sin as to be lost. Not true. Why? The same book, I John 1:7-10. “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” NKJV The text says those who are walking in the light can and do sin. To deny that you sin is to deceive yourselves, be without truth, and make Him a liar. If it is impossible for a child of God to so sin as to be lost, then this teaching also contradicts II Peter2:20-21. “For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning.” NKJV Therefore, by examining the remote context we can determine that “cannot sin” does not mean “impossible to sin.” So what does it mean? We must use remote context again. Joseph is in Egypt; Judah and brothers are there, also. Judah is retelling to Joseph the story about Benjamin. He says in Genesis 44:22. “And we said to my lord, ‘The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.’ ” NKJV “Cannot” here does not mean “impossible” because Benjamin did leave his father and come to Egypt. Judah is saying Benjamin “should not” or “ought not” leave his father because if Benjamin was harmed his father would be devastated. Present day example:

“A child of God is walking down the street with a man of the world. The man of the world says to the child of God. ‘Let’s go into this bar and have a drink.’ The child of God answers, ‘No! I cannot do that. I am a child of God.’ It is not impossible for the child of God to drink whiskey in a bar, but it is not best, not proper, not appropriate, not right, not seemly, not good; to do so would be to suffer dire and eternal consequences, and he cannot do it even though it is possible for him to do it.” The child of God is not to make sin a practice – a habit. Remote context can help us more fully understand the meaning of any passage. (Romans 10:9) “that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” NKJV Another example is Genesis 1 – Exodus 20.

**Conclusion:** No Bible student can ever expect to understand God’s Word without diligently studying the context. It is certainly the key to proper Biblical interpretation.

**Invitation:** Scriptures were left for us so we could know assuredly how to be saved. Acts 2:38 is addressed to non-Christians while Acts 8:22 is addressed to Christians. (Acts 2:38) “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” NKJV (Acts 8:22) “Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.” NKJV

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