BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
Learning How to Understand and Apply the Bible

Session Three: Context

"In a very real sense context is the most basic factor of interpretation. I tell my classes that if anyone is half asleep and does not hear a question that I ask, there is a 50 percent chance of being correct if he or she answers "context." – Grant Osbourn

Introduction

1. **Context:** The word "context" derives from the Latin word, "contextus," which is a combination of the words "con" (together) and "textus" (woven), meaning "interwoven, connected, or joined together." Therefore, "context" is the relationship between an object and its surroundings, where the surroundings help us understand the object.

   a. **Example**: If we were discussing the topic of "finances in the context of my home," we would be talking about my property taxes, homeowner's insurance, utility bills, grocery expenses, clothing for my children, etc. However, if we were discussing the topic of "finances in the context of my church," we would be talking about budget numbers, ministry expenses, campus upkeep, events, etc. So, if someone said, "Our finances have taken a hit during the pandemic," in order to understand what the mean, we would need to know if they were talking about finances in the context of their home, business, church, etc. Context makes a huge difference, and it's never more important than when we aim to understand the Bible.

2. **Biblical Context**: When it comes to "biblical context," our goal is to understand how a portion of Scripture is "interwoven" or "connected" to the words and history that surround it. In other words, we gain understanding not by studying a verse or phrase in isolation, but only when we consider how it fits in with what's taking place in the big picture.

   a. **Literary Context**: This involves interpreting the Bible based upon the verses, chapters, and books that surround a passage of Scripture. In other words, how other parts of the Bible affect the meaning of a particular passage. For example, to understand the significance of Jesus feeding the 5000 in John 6:1-14, we need to interpret it based on Jesus' words in John 6:22-59, about Jesus being "the bread of life."

   b. **Historical Context**: This involves interpreting the Bible based upon the history, culture, and customs during the time when a passage was written. For example, to understand the plagues God sent to Egypt during the exodus, it's helpful to know what life was like during that period of Egyptian history – like how each plague was aimed at rendering an Egyptian god powerless, etc.

<p style="text-align:center">Literary Context</p>

1. **Immediate Context**

   a. **Definition**: The "immediate context" is understanding a word, phrase, or verse based on how it relates to nearby phrases or verses. In other words, "What do the words, phrases, and verses around the word or verse in question tell me about it?"

   b. **Examples**:

   - **Jeremiah 29:11** – "*For I know the plans I have for you*, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

   - **Romans 8:28** – "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*"

   - **1 Timothy 2:12** – "*I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain quiet.*"

   c. **Principle**: Look for words, phrases, or topics within the surrounding verses that either connect or disconnect from the verse(s) in question. Examples: <u>connection words</u> (therefore, for this reason, but, nevertheless, meanwhile, etc.); <u>theological topics</u> (grace, love, service, judgment, church, salvation, etc.); <u>narrative elements</u> (continuation in time, location, characters, or setting).

2. **Sectional Context**

   a. **Definition**: The "sectional context" is understanding a phrase or verse based on how it relates to the larger section (paragraph, chapter). In other words, "How does the paragraph or chapter affect the meaning of this verse?"

   b. **Principle**: Seek to understand the flow and message of the paragraph or chapter that contains the verse(s) in question.

   c. **Example**: Judges 11 – Jephthah makes a tragic vow on the battlefield that requires him to sacrifice his daughter once he arrives home. In 11:35, Jephthah says, "*For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot take back my vow.*" Some have interpreted this verse as a sign of Jephthah's faithfulness and godly example.

3. **Book Context**

   a. **Definition**: The "book context" is understanding a phrase, verse, or chapter based on how it relates to the rest of the biblical book. In other words, "How does the message and goal

of the whole book help explain what a particular verse or chapter is trying to communicate?"

b. **Principle**: Try to discover the overall message of the book, then interpret the verse(s) or chapter in question though that lens.

c. **Example**: Acts 1:8 – "*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*"

4. **Canonical Context**

a. **Definition**: The "canonical context" is understanding a verse, chapter, or book based on how it relates to the biblical canon – the Old Testament, New Testament, or entire Bible.

b. **Principle**: Look for ways a verse or chapter is shaped by the entire message of the Bible (or within the Old or New Testament). How does the verse in question contribute to the overall storyline of Scripture?

c. **Example**: Genesis 50:19-20 – "But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."