

Understanding the Bible

Part 1

Making Observations, Respecting Context

Although the Bible is God's Word, it is also literature and must be read for understanding. The way in which we seek to understand literature is through proper principles of interpretation. There are two essential steps for understanding the Bible: observing what it says and discovering what it means. Only after we've successfully accomplished these steps can we know the significance (application) of a Bible passage. After all, God doesn't like to be misunderstood, so it is essential that we have proper principles for understanding His Word, before we apply it to our lives. Therefore, understanding the Bible is our first priority.

Making Observations

First Principle: The Bible means what it says and says what it means; nothing more and nothing less.

Seven questions to ask and answer when making observations from a Bible passage:

- Who? — Who is speaking, being spoken to, or spoken about?
- What? — What is being said, or not being said? What is the overall idea the author has in mind in any given passage?
- When? — Are there any time references in the passage? Do the verb tenses give any idea as to when something has happened, is happening, or will happen?
- Where? — Where will an event or change take place?
- Why? — Are reasons given for an appeal the author is making? Does the author state his purpose for writing?
- How? — Is there a means by which such and such will take place? Is there a basis upon which something has happened in the past?
- How much? — Are there any references to quantity or quality?'

"Do's" and "Don'ts" When Making Observations

- Do look for the clear, straightforward statements of the passage.
- Do your best to keep personal ideas from interfering with your observations. God doesn't need any help with inspiration!
- Don't create some deep, far-reaching observation in the passage. Scripture has enough profound ideas in the passage.
- Don't assume you have observed all there is. KEEP LOOKING!

Remember the first principle: *The Bible means what it says and says what it means; nothing more and nothing less.*

Read Mark 2:1-12. Answer the seven questions above.

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Respecting Context

The word context is composed of two Latin elements, "con" (together) and "textus" (woven). When we use the word "context," therefore, we are talking about the connection of thought that runs through a passage, those links that weave it into one thought or idea.

Context is important because it gives meaning and significance to words, sentences, paragraphs, chapters, books, thoughts, ideas, and concepts.

- Read Mt. 18:20. What does this teach us about prayer?
- Read Philip. 4:19. What does this teach us about getting a job?
- Read Mt. 7:1. Can I accuse another Christian of sinful behavior?

Clues for Discovering Where a Context Begins/Ends

Begin by asking the question: "Why is this passage here rather than somewhere else?"

Look for a repeated word, phrase, or sentence that may act as a summary statement or heading to a new context, (Mt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, etc.; 1 Cor 7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1).

Look for connecting words (conjunctions, prepositions) which may introduce a transition, e.g., "then, therefore, but, so, and", (Rom 5:1; 12; 8:1).

Is there a rhetorical question which signals a switch to a new theme or is used to carry forward an argument, (James 3:11-12; Romans 6:1; 15)?

The same key word or concept may be repeated several times throughout a passage which could indicate boundaries of a section or thematic emphases, (Gospel of John, the term "believe" occurs 98 times; "witness" or "testimony" occurs 47 times).

A gap in the time sequence most often indicates a new context, (Jn. 6:1; Mt. 17:1).

Note a particular subject, person, or event the author may dwell on, (Rom. 4).

Ask: "Has the author clearly stated his purpose for writing the book?" (Ecc. 12:13; Lk. 1:1-4; Jn 20:30-31; 1 Jn 5:13)

Read 1 Cor 13:1-13. — Do you think "The Greatest Value of All" would be a good title for this context?

Read 1 Cor 8:1-13 — Do you think "The Limits of Christian Freedom" would be a good title for this context?

Read Jm. 1:22-25 and give this context a title.