

Basics of Bible Study

What is the context of the passage?

The word *context* comes from two Latin words: *con*, meaning “together,” and *textus*, meaning “weave.” That is, the meaning of every Scripture verse is woven into its context. Two types of contexts are (1) the historical and (2) the literary (written).

What did a particular Scripture passage mean to the author? What did it mean to the original readers? What does it mean in light of the surrounding passages?

Historical Context (Setting)

Knowing the historical context helps us understand the meaning of a text. To find the historical context, we must ask questions concerning the speaker, listener, and the problem and solution.

- **Speaker:** Who is writing or speaking, and when did this person write?
- **Listener:** Who was the reader or listener? What was the relationship between the author and speaker, and what were the listener’s surroundings?
- **Problem and Solution:** What problems and solutions did the author write about, and what principles for living are in the passage?

Example: Read 1 Corinthians 13 for context...

- **The Speaker:** Paul wrote 1 Corinthians around AD 55–56, at the end of his three-year stay in Ephesus (Acts 20:31; 1 Corinthians 16:5–8).
- **The Listener:** The readers of 1 Corinthians lived in Corinth, located on a narrow strip of land between the Aegean and Adriatic Seas. It was a large, pagan city known for immorality and idolatry. The Corinthians were mostly Gentiles (1 Corinthians 6:9–11; 8:10; 12:13) who loved wisdom and knowledge (1:18–2:5; 4:10; 8:1–13), and they were proud (4:18; 5:2, 6). Paul started the church at Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–18).

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- **The Problem and Solution:** Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13 to show that love is the path to walk on when using spiritual gifts. When believers gather, love guides them to encourage others with their spiritual gifts rather than just encouraging themselves.

Literary Context (Written)

The word *literary* is related to the word *literature*. The literary context refers to the written words, paragraphs, and pages that surround a text. Words make up a verse or text; a text is part of a paragraph; a paragraph is part of a chapter; a chapter is part of a book; and a book is part of the Bible. Thus, the literary context of a text includes the ideas that come before and after it.

For instance, in studying the literary context of 1 Corinthians 13, we must pay careful attention to the chapters immediately before and after, because chapters 12–14 all concern the same topic: spiritual gifts. The biblical authors did not write just one verse for their readers but full accounts or epistles. In fact, the chapter and verse divisions in the Holy Scriptures were added later for easier referencing; they are not from the original authors.

A verse or passage taken out of its literary context is a dangerous weapon of Satan. He has twisted Scripture verses to deceive many Christians, even attempting to use this tactic with the Son of God:

Then the devil took Him to the holy city and had Him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command His angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” (Matthew 4:5–6)

Satan quoted only part of Psalm 91:11–12. He left out the key words “in all your ways.” In this way, Satan used the verse out of its literary context. Jumping off the temple is not “in all your ways.” This is something not from the heart of God but from the devil.

Also, notice the way Jesus rebuked Satan:

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“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Matthew 4:7)

Jesus referred to the larger literary context of the Bible, balancing one verse with another. Every verse must be interpreted within the literary context of the whole Word of God. The Bible is the sharp, two-edged sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). However, a text can become the sword of Satan if it is removed from its context. Peter warned of those who (like Satan) twist and distort the Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16).

Clearly, determining the historical setting and literary context of a passage is an imperative first step when studying the Scriptures.

How Does This Passage Make God Known?

What does the passage teach about God? When we read the Scriptures in faith, we see them as more than a collection of ancient poetry or proverbs; they become a revelation of God Himself, a portrait of our Heavenly Father. By asking the question, “What does this passage say about God?” I come to a fuller understanding and appreciation of His character.

How Can I Apply This Passage to My Own Life?

What does this passage say about my own spiritual condition, about my life and standing with God? The Bible is a living book that transcends time and place. God uses His Word to speak directly into our individual situations. We read it to receive a word from Him.

When you read the Scriptures, act on what you learn. Apply it! Put it into practice, and let it change your life. We come to the Word of God to be changed, not just to learn facts.