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**Core Seminar**

**How To Study the Bible**

**Class 8: Purpose & Context**

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Introduction

***Have you ever seen a verse being used out of context? Can someone give me an example?*** Mt 7:1 – “Do not Judge” or Mt. 5:14 – “City on a Hill”

We’ve spent the last few weeks thinking through genre. This morning, we’ll turn and look at some tools we have for Bible study. And for today our two tools to help us avoid using scripture incorrectly are **the Author’s Purpose** and **Context**. Whenever you approach a passage of scripture, you should always ask two questions:

(1) Why did the author write it?

(2) What is the context?

Knowing the purpose and context of a verse or passage will help you understand your bible correctly and prevent you from making some of the errors we just talked about.

**I. The Author’s Purpose**

So let’s begin with our 1st tool, the author’s purpose.

Every book of the Bible was written with a specific **purpose** in mind, we should interpret each part of a book in light of this purpose.

Now, to the postmodern mentality (common in academia), this makes no sense. The postmodern would say that you can impose whatever meaning you want on a text. That the author’s original intent is really quite irrelevant. But the problem with this approach when we get to the Bible is that the Bible is *God’s* word, not our word. It’s overarching purpose is to tell us about him. And so we need to understand what *he’s* trying to accomplish with it. We know the biblical writers were inspired by God; therefore, **their purpose is God’s purpose**.

So let’s take a look at some passages to see how to uncover the author’s purpose. We’ll start with some where the author’s intent is easy to spot.

**Explicit and Clear Purpose**

Turn with me to the end of John’s gospel, chapter 20 verse 30 - John 20.30-31:

30 “Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 **But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**”

OK. ***So why did John write the book of John?*** [wait for an answer]. Right. Now, we don’t get this until the very end of the book. But he couldn’t be any more explicit about his purpose for writing, could he?

When you study the book of John, then, you need to keep this purpose in mind. It’s one reason why John is so explicit about who Jesus is (remember last week).

Let’s turn to another passage in John and see how this helps us. Look at John 6:60. Jesus has just fed the 5000 and then talked about himself as the bread of heaven.

**60**When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” **61**But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? **62**Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? **63**It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. **64**But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) **65**And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

***How does knowing John’s intent help us interpret this passage? If we didn’t know his intent, how might we misinterpret this passage?***

Let’s look at a second example. Turn with me to 1 John chapter 5 verse 13:

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

**So, what is John’s purpose in writing 1John?** – [So that believers will have assurance]

Why is knowing this purpose important? Take look at Chapter 2 verse 4:

“Whoever says, “I know him,” **but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person**.”

***What might be the problem with reading 2:4 in isolation without knowing John’s overall purpose?***

[A person might read this verse in isolation and think they aren’t a Christian if they disobey just one of God’s commands. Well that would be a misunderstanding of the gospel and a misunderstanding of John’s purpose.]

John wants to give the reader assurance not doubt. So we need to interpret 2:4 with that in mind. There are certainly other passages of Scripture designed to give doubt to those who aren’t really in Christ. But that’s not John’s purpose here.

**Implicit or more ambiguous purpose**

So what if the purpose isn’t obvious or explicit? In these cases, we should examine the text for clues. To try and understand why it was written and what the main themes are.

When dealing with a NT epistle or OT Prophet try to answer these four questions to get a sense of the purpose (on handout):

1. Who is writing to whom?

2. What is the situation of the author and reader?

3. Are there any problems or issues that are being addressed?

4. Are there andy repeated themes or a single idea holding the book together?

Let’s ask these questions of 2 Timothy 1.9-10 [read the passage].

“9 He [God] has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

***Before we ask our questions, what might we take from this passage reading it in isolation (without knowing the purpose)?***

-We have been saved by grace and not by works (v. 9);

-That grace was received through Christ before the beginning of time (v. 9);

So some good stuff, right? These verses are profitable just by themselves. But we’ll get more out of them, I promise you, if we understand how they support Paul’s main purpose for 2 Timothy. So let’s ask our four questions.

[I’ve written down all the questions and answers below. But don’t do this lecture-style; have the class answer these for you. Consider having the class look over 2 Timothy for 2-3 minutes.]

***1. Who is writing to whom?***

Who’s the recipient? - Paul is writing to his dear friend, Timothy (1:1-2).

2 To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1.2)

Who’s the author? - Paul is an apostle and commissioned to speak for Christ

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, in keeping with the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus (1.1)

11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. (1.11)

Who is Timothy? - -Timothy is a church leader

15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. (2.15)

**2. What is Paul and Timothy’s situation?**

Paul is in **prison** and has **suffered** for preaching the gospel and so will Timothy

8 So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, **join with me** in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. (1.8)

12 That is why I am suffering as I am.... (1.12)

9 for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. (2.9)

Many have **deserted him**

15 You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes. (1.15)

16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. (4.16)

Paul believes he is at the **end of the line and probably about to die**

6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (4.6-8)

**3. Are there any problems being addressed?**

There are **false teachers** in Timothy’s church who are distorting the gospel

17 Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18 who have departed from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some. (2.17-18)

8 Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so also these teachers oppose the truth. They are men of depraved minds, who, as far as the faith is concerned, are rejected. (3.8)

Paul warns that some in the future will **fall prey to false teaching**

3 For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. (4.3)

**4. Any repeated themes?**

Paul encourages Timothy to **stand firm** for the true gospel (1.8,14)

8 So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God. (1.8 - right before our verses)

14 Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (1.14)

Following Christ will involve **persecution**/suffering

12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (3.12)

So based on our answers to the 4 questions, **would someone volunteer to give a summary statement of Paul’s purpose for writing 2 Timothy?**

Paul is urging Timothy to stand firm for the true gospel to refute false teaching and train others for gospel work despite the suffering he will encounter, and in light of the glorious future before him.

Does this purpose effect how we interpret our passage? Let’s read it again (2 Tim 1:9-10):

“9 He [God] has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”

***How does knowing the purpose affect the meaning?***

[This passage isn’t Paul teaching Timothy the gospel for the first time. Timothy has probably heard and taught the gospel hundreds of times, apparently Paul believes he can’t hear it enough and goes on a little gospel tangent right at the beginning of his letter. So as Timothy faces **suffering** and **false teaching**, Paul wants Timothy to remember the gospel, preach the gospel, and rest in the gospel. ]

Timothy has nothing to fear because he has already been (1) saved by grace, (2) death has been defeated, and (3) he has immortality to look forward to.

***OK. So how does this new insight help us apply this passage?***

* Have you ever had to counsel a friend or spouse who is struggling but you feel like you don’t have anything really insightful to say?
* Sure you could remind them of the gospel, but they already know it, so that won’t be very helpful, right? And if you do remind them of the gospel, there is a good chance they’re not going to be helped by it, right?
* However, what Paul is saying to Timothy is: the gospel should always be at the center and is always sufficient! No matter how familiar you are with it. You can’t go wrong with praying and sharing the gospel.

Do you see how understanding the author’s purpose helps you understand a passage?

If you don’t understand the author’s purpose, you won’t often get the passage completely wrong (by God’s grace). But you’ll probably end up simply affirming a general truth rather than seeing the deeper meaning of the passage.

OK. So all that’s about identifying meaning in these two genres: letters and prophets.

**What about other genres?**

When dealing with narratives, consider what the author chooses **to put in** and chooses **to leave out** ... This helps us understand the author’s intention.

This is especially important when reading two different accounts of the same event.

For example, consider David’s sin with Bathsheba, the author of I & II Chronicles leaves it out because his intent is to celebrate **what is best about Israel’s and Judah’s kings** in anticipation of the greatest King of all, Jesus.

However, II Samuel keeps it in because he has a different purpose, to show that even King David is a sinner and in need of a Savior.

The same is true for the gospels. We should be careful about cross-referencing Matthew with Luke to fill in missing events. What if Matthew intended those events to be missing?

Other books may prove more difficult to determine the intent; but you can always search for **dominate themes** and hints of what the author is concerned about.

QUESTIONS?

**II. Context**

So now let’s move on to our second tool, context. ***Can someone tell me what the difference is between a novel and an encyclopedia?***

We should read the bible more like a novel and less like a spiritual encyclopedia. Each verse, chapter, and book are connected. And all are connected to the grand narrative of the Bible that we’ve been talking about in this class:

God glorifying himself through the salvation of his people and the judgment of his enemies, through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

An example of using the bible like an encyclopedia would be if you read the ten commandments in isolation. If you read them in isolation you may be tempted towards a works-based understanding of how man is saved. If I do these commandments, then God will save me.

But if you read the introduction to the commandments in context which reads, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” AND THEN you read the ten commandments, then you realize that God gave his people the commandments AFTER he saved them out of Egypt and is calling them to live **in light of their salvation**, not telling them how to earn it.

So when studying a passage of Scripture, it’s essential that we ask how the passage fits into **what comes before it** and **what comes after it**.

[Refer to graphic on handout]

As we think about a passage in the context of the entire Bible, it’s important to keep two different lenses in mind.

* The first is “Systematic Theology.” Systematic Theology is a categorization of Biblical truth. If you pick up a “Systematic Theology” on the CHBC book stall, it will help you understand what the whole Bible says about specific topics. Like sin, like Jesus’ divine nature, like the end times, and so forth.
* The second is “Biblical Theology.” That’s the storyline of God’s plan of redemption that flows from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation. Placing your text in the context of Biblical Theology will contextualize how it fits into God’s great plan of redemption.   
    
    
  And that’s important. Because if we only ever think about Bible-level context in terms of Systematic Theology, we’ll lose some of the texture and force of what’s going on. For example, let’s say I’m studying God’s condemnation of Israel’s sin in Amos. I could think systematically about sin through the entire Bible. And that’s good context.   
    
  But by simply studying a snapshot of what the Bible teaches, I’m going to miss something in Amos. Instead, it helps to consider how the doctrine of sin has been developed up to this point in the Bible. And when I do that, I’ll see that by this point in time, the people have gone back to their sin after God’s shown them grace. Again and again. For generations. For dozens of generations over hundreds of years. To the point the real question about sin I should be feeling at this point is why on earth God still puts up with these people!  
    
  That’s the feeling I should have when I approach sin in Amos if I’m using the lens of Biblical Theology. You’ll see a few recommendations on the back of your handout for good books to give you an angle on Biblical Theology. “Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church” by Michael Lawrence; “God’s Big Picture” by Vaughn Roberts; “Gospel and Kingdom” by Graham Goldsworthy. “The Big Picture Story Bible” by David Helm is intended for kids, but does an amazing job of fitting the whole Bible together as well. *And* it has pictures!

Let’s walk through a familiar verse so you can see the implications of reading a verse in context. Turn with me in your bibles to John 3.16.

**1. Sentence**: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

**2. Paragraph**: John 3.16-21 ... John not only mentioned those who believe and are saved but also those who don’t believe and are condemned (Read v. 18).

**3. Chapter**: In the beginning of the chapter in verses 1-21, Jesus teaches Nicodemus that men must be “born again,” (v. 3) and that the Son of Man must be “lifted up” (vv. 14-15) explaining more about how this salvation would happen.

Then, at the very end of the chapter, in verse 36, John the Baptist says, “whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

We can already see how knowing the context of the chapter effects the meaning.

[Talk about how John 3:16 is only used to discuss the positive.]

**4. Book**: As we discussed in the author’s purpose section, the book of John was “**written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**”

You see here that verse 16 is perhaps **the most concentrated expression of John’s purpose** ... To show that Jesus is the Savior and whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life!

**5. Bible**: In many ways John 3.16 can be considered **the crescendo** of the biblical narrative. For thousands of years God has been progressively revealing his great plan and now here it is in vivid color. The promised savior has come and is offering us the Salvation that has been promised.

So what are the best ways to make sure you’re taking context into account?

1. Paragraph: Pay close attention to transition words. Words like “for,” “but,” “therefore,” “and,” or “after this” demand that you figure out the connection between what you’re studying and the prior passage before you go any further. We has an upcoming class on linking words.
2. Chapter: Read before and after the section you’re about to study. You’ll notice if you ever go to Wednesday night Bible study that this is our standard practice.
3. Chapter: If you find that you’re in the middle of an argument (like the opening chapters of Romans), it can help to trace where you are in that argument as a way to understand context.
4. Chapter: ask yourself “what would be missing in this book of the Bible if this chapter were to suddenly disappear?”
5. Book: It can help to understand how the book is structured. Is it like Proverbs where the structure is very loose and doesn’t matter much? Or like Job that we looked at a few weeks ago, where understanding how the book is put together is actually critical to understanding each passage inside it. The books where structure matters most are Revelation, Job, Ecclesiastes. Matthew, Daniel, Malachi, and Exodus are a close second. For most other books, structure is good to know, but not essential to understanding context. If you’re interested, the Old and New Testament overview classes do a good job of helping you see how each book is structured. We’ll look at structure in more detail next week.
6. Book: another good way to get context at the book level is to read through an introduction to that book. Like you’d find in a study Bible or in the “Intro to the OT” or NT on the bookstall or in the library. Mark Dever’s “Promises Made” and “Promises Kept” books are also helpful. They contain a sermon each on every book in the Bible.
7. Bible: a good book on Biblical Theology can help you understand where your passage fits into the overall flow of the Bible. I mentioned some of these earlier.

**One final example. The importance of immediate context.**

Mattew 6:5-7 (keep it short and don’t over do it) compared to Luke 18:1 (always pray and never give up). Mathew – against false forms of religion. Luke -directed towards those who are cool and undisciplined in their prayer life

QUESTIONS?

**Conclusion:**

We talked today about using two tools - the author’s purpose and context to help us discover the meaning of a particular passage. But we should always keep in mind that God’s underlying purpose in all of scripture is the revelation of his glory, primarily as it is displayed through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, when we sit down to study God’s Word, as we seek to discern the purpose and the context of a passage, we should do so with the goal of growing in our knowledge of Him in all his glory!