

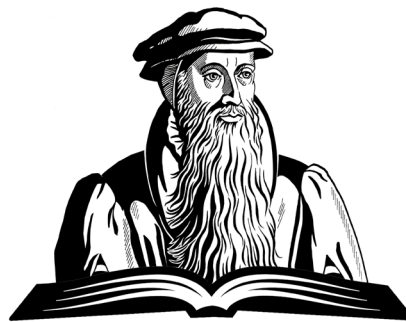
Video Lecture Series

HERMENEUTICS

*Principles of Scripture
Interpretation*

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 5
CONTEXT



The John Knox Institute
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Principles of Scripture Interpretation

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Lecture 5 **Context**

Has someone ever shown you a picture or painting of an obscure object which you could not identify? Perhaps it was a small detail of something that was seen up close, so close in fact that you could not figure out exactly what it was. Yes, you could see the shape, and texture, and color, and it even, perhaps, looked vaguely familiar, but you still could not identify the object. Then someone shows you another picture of the same thing, only zoomed out, revealing the broader context for the object, and you can immediately recognize it, and say, “Ah, of course! I know what that is.” Perhaps it was a single blade of grass in a large yard, or something similar. Seeing it in context enabled you to recognize it.

Well, this illustrates the principle of interpretation that we will be considering in this lecture—the importance of *reading verses of Scripture in their Context* in order to rightly understand them. Peter writes about Paul’s epistles, in 2 Peter 3, verse 16, and says, “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” Peter identifies a problem. He says that some of Paul’s writings, like some other parts of Scripture, are difficult to understand. But that is not the problem. We learned in our first and second lectures that there are diverse parts to the Bible, and some passages are more easily and clearly understood than other parts. Peter tells us the problem is with people, with those who interpret Scripture. He describes those who are unlearned, that is, ignorant and untaught, and who are spiritual unstable. When the Bible was placed in their hands, they twisted it, they distorted it, that is, rather than receiving and understanding the Scriptures properly, they mangled the true meaning of Scripture. One way in which men can do this is by ripping what the Scripture says out of its Context, and trying to make the Scriptures mean something other than God intended. And the results are spiritually catastrophic. Peter says it resulted in their own destruction.

Well this introduces for us the principle of Scriptural interpretation that we’ll be considering in this lecture. In the last lecture, we explored the principle of *comparing Scripture with Scripture* in our interpretation. In this fifth lecture, we’ll consider another Biblical principle, the importance of *interpreting every Scripture passage in light of its Context*. So the previous lecture taught us

to understand the meaning of a passage by comparing it more broadly to what we read elsewhere in the Bible. In this lesson, we will learn that we also must narrow our scope, and focus on the Context in which the passage is placed, in order to understand its meaning.

And so we'll begin again, first of all, with the principle. The principle we are considering in this lecture teaches us that *we must interpret every passage in light of its Context*, in order to understand it correctly. So let's first define our terms.

The word "context" literally means "a weaving together." You can think of a beautiful tapestry in which all of the threads are woven neatly together. The context of a Bible passage is the fibrous material which binds every individual text to the surrounding passage. Every part of a Scripture is part of a whole. In English, we have a quaint phrase that says, "Every text without a context is a pretext." A pretext refers to using a passage for our own hidden purposes—making it mean what we want, rather than submitting to the true meaning of the text. One of the simplest errors in reading the Bible is the failure to consider the immediate context of the verse or passage under consideration. In attempting to prove a point or establish a doctrine, some people will string together a number of verses taken out of their context that sound as if they substantiate what they're teaching. However, whenever we remove a verse from its context, we will distort its true meaning. This can take various forms. Well-meaning people will sometimes put select verses on a card, or others compile a whole book with random promises. And this can be very edifying, when done properly. But words of Scripture can also be lifted out of their context and applied in ways that contradict their original meaning. Now even worse, the cults are especially guilty of committing this error, in order to promote their false doctrines. Many examples could be cited, but the Mormons, for example, appeal to 1 Corinthians 15, verse 29, in order to prove—so called—their false doctrine of encouraging individuals to be baptized for their dead ancestors. That's not at all what that passage is teaching.

Well, now that we have a grasp of the general principle, we need to open this up in greater detail and see how to implement it. And that brings us to our next point—the *types of Context*. There are several types of context we need to consider. So two broad categories would include the *Historical Context*, and the *Biblical Context*.

The *Historical* considers questions such as, Who is the author? Who was the audience? What was the time, place, and circumstances of the writing? and so on. Knowing the historical circumstances can enable us to better understand the meaning of a given passage. We'll consider the place of the *Historical Context* in a future lecture. In this lecture, we're focusing on the *Biblical Context*.

Now, in our Bibles, we have verse and chapter divisions and numbers. While these are incredibly helpful for locating and referring to specific texts of Scripture, the verse and chapter divisions are not inspired. Now, the Book of Psalms would be an exception to chapter divisions, as they were composed as individual songs. Now, this may come as a surprise to some people, but the original authors did not include the numbers that are inserted into our translations of the Bible, for verses and chapters. While they are useful, these tools can also hinder us, in our failure to draw important connections between various verses or chapters, because of where they break or divide. For this reason, studying the Context is even more important. We will consider a gradation of levels, in which an individual text can be viewed and interpreted.

First of all, the most obvious should be the *immediate Context*. And so, the immediate context is comprised of the few verses or words before and after a verse we are studying. This may form the paragraph in which the verse occurs. Nearly every verse—with the exception of some Proverbs—

nearly every verse has an immediate context. For example, when you read the word, “therefore,” you should always ask the question, “What is it there for?” Now, also, look for words such as, “for,” “because,” “wherefore,” or, “for this reason,” and similar language, because that language points your attention to a conclusion that follows, based on what was said before it. So make sure to understand the previous verses that come before it.

Let me provide a simple example. Second Corinthians 7, verse 1, is the start of a new chapter in our translations. It begins with these words, “Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.” So this verse includes an exhortation to cleanse ourselves and to perfect holiness. But notice the word “therefore.” This is a conclusion drawn from what was said in what went before it, which is actually in chapter 6. More specifically, Paul refers to promises, in chapter 7, verse 1, which also must be found in chapter 6. And, who is being addressed? Those described as “dearly beloved,” who are they? Well chapter 6 supplies this answer too. So if you just open your Bible and start reading at the beginning of chapter 7, without reading chapter 6, you would be less able to understand chapter 7, verse 1. Chapter 6 makes clear that he’s addressing true believers, not everyone else. They are those who are the temple of God, chapter 6 says—the people of God and the children of God. Furthermore, we can’t heed the exhortation without believing and depending on the precious promises that were referred to in chapter 6, where God says, “I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters.” Those are the precious promises that are being referred to in verse 1. And so you can’t properly understand how to cleanse yourself or perfect holiness, without first of all absorbing and understanding everything that was said previously. Now, you can apply the same principle to countless other passages.

A second category is *the Chapter Context*. So we need to identify the relation of a single verse or a few verses to what is being taught in the whole chapter. Sometimes the audience, or a topic that is addressed is at the beginning of the chapter, and that may shed light on a verse later in the chapter. Romans 8, verse 28 is a popular verse for good reasons, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” But this does not apply to everyone indiscriminately. He’s speaking to the believer, those who are loved by God and called by God. The chapter opens by saying, “There is therefore now no condemnation” for those in Christ. And it ends by saying there is no separation for the believer from the love of God in Christ. No condemnation at the beginning, no separation at the end. And even the next verse, verse 29 that follows verse 28, speaks of those who are predestined by God unto salvation. And so we understand Romans 8, verse 28, properly by placing it in the *Context of its chapter*.

Sometimes, what follows in the chapter helps us interpret what comes earlier in the chapter. So Hebrews 6 warns about unbelief and a failure to persevere. We come to very heavy words in Hebrews 6, verses 4 to 6—it says, “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.” Now some read these words and conclude that a true believer, who is in a state of saving grace, can fall and lose their salvation. But keep reading. We read in verse 9, after that, these words: “But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak.” So he’s not referring to the regenerate in verses 4 to 6, as verse 9 makes

clear. He's referring to those who look identical to someone who is saved, but is actually not saved. We can also use our previous lecture on *comparing Scripture with Scripture*, and see further that a true believer cannot lose their salvation. So the *Context within the chapter* is also essential for proper interpretation.

A third category, by way of *Context*, is seeing *the Context of an entire topic under discussion*. So this may include several chapters in a book. For example, 1 Corinthians 12 to 14, which addresses gifts within the church. Or, it could include less than the length of one chapter. Jesus says, in Matthew, chapter 18, verse 20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." But this is the conclusion of a topic that began in verse 15, in which the Lord is addressing his church as gathered, and more specifically, the church formally gathered for church discipline. It of course, applies to Christ's church gathered on all occasions, but the context adds more, in teaching us that Christ is present in the pronouncements of the censures of church discipline against wayward and unrepentant members. And this is further corroborated by what we read in 1 Corinthians 5, verses 4 and 5, about this aspect of church discipline. That is a true parallel, in terms of *comparing Scripture with Scripture*, to what we find in Matthew, chapter 18.

Fourthly, we should *consider the Context of an entire book of the Bible*. Every book has its own divine purpose for why God included it in the Scriptures. An individual verse should be understood in light of the theme of the book. We can also consider the structure that God gave to the book. So this was true regarding what we saw in Hebrews 6, verses 4 to 6. The whole book sets forth the supremacy of Jesus Christ, in order to strengthen faith and perseverance among God's people, and to prevent the Christian or believing Jews from returning to unbelief, to the Old Testament ceremonies. Or, when Paul writes in Philippians 4, of rejoicing always in the Lord, of peace, and not being anxious, and contentment in all circumstances, it helps to place this in the light of what he said way back in Philippians 1, verse 13, where he said, "So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places." He was under trials, persecution, and hardship, and so the rejoicing, and contentment, and peace of chapter 4 are not just for comfortable times of ease, but actually the fruit that the Christian can enjoy in times of difficulty.

Fifthly, we should also *consider the Context of a passage in light of the testament in which it is found*, whether Old Testament or New Testament. Both testaments have peculiar characteristics and features, though the primary emphasis is on the continuity of Old and New Testament, not discontinuity. They represent one God, one gospel, one Savior, one people of God. But there are very different things that are addressed. Because the Old Testament is all speaking prior to Jesus' coming, whereas the New Testament is speaking when and after Jesus comes. And so, understanding the relationship of the Old and New Testaments is fundamental to an accurate interpretation, and to theology in general. But, of course, this is a huge topic. For those interested in exploring this in detail, as noted in a previous lecture, we have another module, John Knox Institute does, on understanding the history of redemption from Genesis to Revelation. But the point here is that we place a text or passage in light of the testament in which it's found. Reading a passage out of the Old Testament places us in circumstances and in a context in which we understand all of this is pointing forward to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that will help us clarify sometimes what we're reading.

Lastly, and briefly, *we need to view every passage within the Context of the whole Bible*. And I only raise this in order to tie the principle of *Context* in this lecture to the principle we learned in the last lecture, about *comparing Scripture with Scripture*. They actually go together. *Comparing Scripture with Scripture* is the broadest way of interpreting a particular passage within its overall

context, that is, *the Context of the whole of Scripture*. Every component of Scripture is woven together as one seamless revelation from God.

Thirdly, before we conclude, let me leave you with a few further points of counsel regarding the practical use of this principle.

First of all, be careful not to take a verse out of Context when seeking guidance from the Lord. So for example, if a young lady is praying for direction on whether God will give her a husband, and then she comes across, in her reading, Zechariah, chapter 9, verse 9, which says, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation,” and so on. She cannot use this passage to conclude that the answer is “Yes,” that the Lord wants her to marry a given man. Why?—because that’s taking it out of its Context. Zechariah 9, verse 9, is referring to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we need to try to understand what the passage means, and not just try to think in terms of what it may mean for us. So be careful on that point.

Secondly, be careful not to take a verse out of Context when formulating your theological convictions. When we read in Romans 9, verse 13, “As it is written Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated,” you cannot conclude that the reason for God’s love or hatred was based on Jacob and Esau’s behavior. The Context tells us, in verse 11, “For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth.” God’s sovereign will determined the state of Jacob and Esau, not their behavior. So be careful when formulating theological convictions not to take a verse out of Context.

And then thirdly, be careful to read around the passage you are studying. As we’ve seen in this lecture, always consider the *various types of Context* in which a passage is found. It’s good to single out a verse, and to dig down, and mine its riches, to meditate upon it—we’ll talk more about this later in the course. But never do that to the exclusion of reading around the passage. Because the various types of Contexts will cast light on enabling you to understand that verse or passage more clearly.

Well, in conclusion, in this lecture, we’ve explored the principle of *interpreting every passage in light of its Context*. In a future lecture, we will return to the idea of Context by learning to also analyze the *Historical Context* of a passage. But before we go there, in the next lecture, we will consider the principles related to our study of the *Words and grammar* in Scripture, and how this influences our reading and understanding of the Bible.