



Session 8: 'How important is context when studying the Bible?'

Questions:

1. What most challenged you about the video? And why?
2. How can reading the Bible in context change the way we see God?
3. How can reading the Bible in context, change the way we live?
4. In what ways have you read the Bible out of context before? Can you see how God wants to speak to you more widely?
5. What resources/methods have you used to help you study the Bible and read it in context?
6. Read Philippians 4: 10-14, what is Paul saying about his circumstances? How is this different to the way this verse is often quoted?
7. What are you going to do as a result of today's teaching?

(If you have time, you could read Ephesians 5:21-25 - can you see how this passage has been misused? How different is the message when you read it in context?)

Notes

- Overall context of the Bible as God's love letter to us and revealing Himself to us. Important to understand His character to get the tone right.
- Context of the type of writing – poetry, prophecy, historic, letter etc, as they are written for different purposes.
- Getting the historic & cultural setting of the passage can really help to understand it.
- Careful not to take verses out of context for our pet subjects or to back up our theology.

Introduction

When it comes to the Bible context is important. To understand the heart of God when we are reading helps us to see the wider message and helps us to see the hand of God throughout history and in our history.

1. The Context of God's love letter to us and revealing Himself to us

There is a great danger in taking verses out of context and not understanding the character of God and using them as a weapon to condemn ourselves and others.

For example:

¹⁹The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

Some might:

- Think they are not saved if they sin in any of these ways;
- Judge others and pick out specific sins.

We need to **see God's love and grace as the glasses through which to read the Bible**. Reading the wider Bible allows us to see His love and grace throughout the Bible.

Another example:

New Testament: God of Grace vs Old Testament: God of Judgment???

Meta narrative of the Bible

This basically means the wider story of God's interaction with humanity. This is more important than ever in a culture that is now not familiar with the Bible at all.

See the hand of God throughout the history of the people of God.

2. The Context of the type of writing – poetry, prophecy, historic, letter etc

- Different literature has different purposes;
- Some parts are history, but some are poetic and symbolic.

For example:

Revelation is highly symbolic.

Another example:

Jesus' speech uses language techniques such as hyperbole: In Matthew 5:29-30 Jesus says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to depart into hell."

We know He's not saying to literally cut off our hands, but we can see how seriously He takes sins and that we need to take ourselves out of the way of temptation.

3. Context of historic & cultural setting of the passage

The Bible was written a long time ago in a very different society with a very different worldview. Knowing the context can speak to us in ways than we never thought of before and not knowing the context can lead us to believe things and act in ways that simply are not correct.

For example:

Some books are letters written with the culture of the Early Church into specific contexts where people may have been behaving in a certain way (e.g. 1 Corinthians 14:34).

4. Be careful not to take verses out of context for our pet subjects or to back up our theology

Verses out of context have been used in ways which are not harmful, but in the past they have been used to support all sorts of situations including slavery, so it's so important to look around the verse to see what it is actually saying.

For example, taking the verse: "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22) has been used over many years to insist women obey their husbands without either taking the surrounding verses and the wider narrative of Jesus' treatment of women.

Look at the wider passage: Ephesians 5:21-25

This is so much more than one verse. This encourages all to submit to one another, as well as putting a higher responsibility on the husband to love their wives like Jesus loves the church (i.e lay His life down for her).

'Name it and claim it' vs submit and listen to God:

- Can be damaging for people who are going through a difficult time and are not experiencing a miracle.

- Make sure that our prayers are humbly asking an Almighty God to heal and not telling God what to do.
- E.g. Psalm 122, we are told to pray for peace and prosperity. When I read the teaching of Jesus it seems He is saying the opposite. Being a follower of Jesus is not about what you have but about walking in the footsteps of Jesus, dying to yourself and serving others. The words on Psalm 122 for peace and prosperity are 'shalom' and 'shalvah.' Shalom speaks of 'wholeness that result from God's will being complete in us' which results in streams of Living water being released through us.

'Shalvah' or 'prosperity' is 'nothing to do with insurance policies or large bank accounts' but the root word comes from 'leisure', 'the relaxed stance of one who knows that everything is alright because God is over us, with us and for us in Jesus Christ'. 'It's the leisure of the person who knows that every moment of our existence is at the disposal of God, lived under the mercy of God' (Eugene Peterson).

Conclusion

Embrace the Bible as a whole because it's the Word of God and He wants to bring us true freedom and renew our minds.

Resources:

Storylines by Andy Croft and Mike Pilivachi

The Bible Project

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction by Eugene Peterson