

# Slaves to Context

## Introduction

1. If passing by a private conversation, you overheard me say, “I beat my wife last night,” what would you do?
    - a. If you were like most preachers, you would have the sound bite you need to slander me to any listener.
    - b. Instead of taking the pains to ask for clarification, you would run wild with your newly discovered “fact.”
    - c. Rick Warren, who even avoids using whole verses, would have more than enough for his “purposes.”
    - d. But a wise man would not make any assumptions at all about a statement without knowing its context.
    - e. For the truth could be (1) we played monopoly, (2) had a race around the block, (3) got to bed at different times, (4) drove home in two different vehicles, (5) counted calories at supper, or countless other options.
  2. Making a judgment from a sound bite or short section of any spoken or written material is wrong and cruel.
    - a. You have had things taken out of context before, and you were offended at the malicious treatment.
    - b. The blessed God of heaven must feel the same way, when men ignore context to sling sound bites around.
    - c. He condemned men doing it to each other, as sinners making men an offender “for a word” (Is 29:20-21).
    - d. You cannot prove anything but your ignorance and wickedness by neglecting the context for anything.
    - e. Most preachers today corrupt the word of God regularly by using phrases or verses out of context.
- I. Remember this law: **A text used out of context is a pretext**. Don’t violate it; learn to spot it.
- A. ***A text*** is a word, clause, verse, paragraph, chapter, or book you are seeking to interpret.
  - B. ***Context*** is the surrounding information, which shows the author’s meaning by the text.
  - C. ***Out of context*** is using words and their sound contrary to the surrounding information.
  - D. ***A pretext*** is a false and incorrect impression designed to hide or disguise the real intent.
  - E. Using a verse contrary to its context gives a misleading and deceitful sound of words to teach something the author did not intend and/or is not true. Hate this abuse of words!
  - F. You have had your words used out of context before, and you hated the corruption of your intent and meaning. Make sure you never do it with the precious Word of God.
  - G. This rule applies to all writings and conversations of every sort, and so context is well understood by most people. Contracts, court records, novels, promises, and poetry are all understood in context, or surrounding information, to truly understand their meaning.
  - H. Even single words are meaningless without a context, which is why you asked your teacher to use them in a sentence before you would try to spell them in a spelling bee!
  - I. Even if you use a verse to teach a true point, make sure you still honor its context. For using the wrong verse to teach the right point is the first subtle step to heresy. Mark it!
  - J. If we think carefully, we will see that the first rule was truly a rule of overall context!
- II. What is context? Let us make sure we understand exactly what we mean by context.
- A. **Context**. The whole structure of a connected passage regarded in its bearing upon any of the parts which constitute it; the parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or ‘text’ and determine its meaning. [OED]
  - B. Context is the surrounding information that tells us what an author means by individual words, sentences, or paragraphs within a passage. Without grasping the author’s viewpoint and intent, we will face many words and turns of phrase that we will not properly understand. By missing the author’s perspective, we will be confused and misinterpret particular and individual words, sentences, and paragraphs of the work.
  - C. Context means the weaving together of words and sentences. We must determine the sense of Scripture and not just its sound. We do this by carefully considering the connection that each word, sentence, and section have to those around it.

- D. Every word in the Bible is part of a verse, every verse part of a paragraph, every paragraph part of a chapter, every chapter part of a book, and every book is part of the whole Bible. How in the world can we presume to isolate single words and sentences?
- E. Context includes the varying literary genres used in the Bible. There is historical (Acts), dramatic (Job, Song of Solomon), poetic (Psalms), wise sayings (Proverbs), argumentative (Romans, Hebrews), and apocalyptic (Daniel, Revelation) among others.
- F. We may have connections of words or thoughts based on a historical, a doctrinal, a logical, a rhythmic, a musical, or a psychological connection among many others. We learn this by talking and reading.
- G. Again, remember when your own words have been used out of context. A single word, sentence, paragraph, speech, or document was singled out and given a meaning that did not agree with all the words, expressions, tones, circumstances, audience, acts, or facts surrounding it. You were rightly offended, and so is the Lord when we abuse His word!
- H. Isolating individual words or verses is like giving an impression of a Rembrandt from looking at one square inch of it or of Handel's "Messiah" by listening to a few bars!
- I. One preacher said, "Text determines context," and then used Prov 25:11 to "prove" it!
  1. How in the world can one word determine the intent of a 40-page document?
  2. If you hear me say, "I beat my wife last night," please inquire further than the word "beat" and this one sentence to find out what I actually did to her! We played monopoly!
  3. This disdain for context is the result of unbounded arrogance coupled with bondage to a literal, mechanical system of interpretation.
  4. Verses can then take on meanings never imagined by the Holy Spirit or any other human reader in the history of the world. As in the case of Proverbs 25:11.

- III. Consider one example from a text preached recently from Galatians chapter one (Galatians 1:15).
  - A. God was pleased to reveal Jesus to Paul for ministry, doing so on the Damascus road.
  - B. Since parenthetical elements, or nonrestrictive phrases, are not necessary to a sentence, verses 15 and 16 may be read for clear understanding without the last two phrases of 15.
    1. The time element of *when* applies to the revealing of Christ to Paul for preaching.
    2. The decision element of *pleased* applies to God's timing of the revelation.
    3. The other two phrases are nonrestrictive phrases, or parenthetical elements, that are not necessary. They provide further facts concerning God's choice of Paul.
  - C. There is nothing in this verse about salvation, especially about the timing of regeneration.
    1. Some impulsive teachers have taught that Paul was born again when he was born!
    2. But the two parenthetical elements or nonrestrictive clauses have no grammatical or logical connection, especially not any cause and effect relationship.
    3. If the Spirit uses such language for salvation, He will say so (II Timothy 1:9-10).
  - D. The separation and call of this verse are God's providential plan for Paul to be an apostle.
    1. The context demands the scope and intent is Paul's apostleship (1:1,11-12,16-17).
    2. The issue is Paul's conversion out of Judaism to preach to the heathen (1:13-16).
    3. The words of the parenthetical elements in 15 do not indicate any other subject.
    4. The introduction of childbirth would add nothing, since the other apostles, the false teachers, and all men have been physically born by God's providence!
    5. Nowhere in Holy Scripture is *separate* or *separated* used for childbirth. Nowhere!
    6. The introduction of salvation, especially regeneration, would have no value, for the salvation of the apostles or even false teachers is not the topic being argued.
    7. By comparing scripture (I Cor 2:13), we find a ministerial use (Is 49:1,5; Jer 1:5).
    8. By comparing scripture (I Cor 2:13), we find a description of Paul (Romans 1:1).

9. By comparing scripture (I Cor 2:13), we find more verses (Acts 13:2; I Cor 1:1).
10. God *separated*, meaning He appointed or ordained or sanctified, Paul to be an apostle of Jesus Christ from the very beginning of his life (Jeremiah 1:5).
11. God *called*, meaning He appointed or ordained, Paul to be an apostle (I Corinthians 7:20; I Timothy 2:7; II Timothy 1:11; Hebrews 5:1,4).
12. Any effort to see anything else in this text is willful ignorance or rebellion.

- IV. Context is clearly the first positive rule of interpretation in identifying the sense God intended.
- A. After proving what a verse cannot mean (#1), we start here to find what it does mean.
  - B. By connecting mere words or sentences without reference to their context, we can prove anything. It is a shame that so much preaching is done today with words and verses used as mottoes and sound bites with little or no regard to their connection. Consider:
    1. The Bible says, Judas "went and hanged himself" (Matthew 27:5).
    2. The Bible says that Jesus said, "Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37).
    3. The Bible says that Jesus said, "That thou doest, do quickly" (John 13:27).
    4. Should we take these Bible verses and quickly go out and hang ourselves?
  - C. Let us consider another example of how connecting unrelated words will confound us!
    1. Russellites quote the Bible, "The life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev 17:11).
    2. Russellites quote the Bible, "Thou shalt not eat the blood thereof" (Deut 22:23).
    3. They take these verses and jump to the conclusion blood transfusions are wrong!
  - D. Simply consider the meaning and importance of "therefore." When finding this word, we should ask, "What is the "therefore" there for?" It is a word crying for its context.
    1. The word itself indicates a conclusion drawn from what has been said before. Consider II Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 2:1; and 4:9 among 1237 occurrences.
    2. And don't forget "for this cause" (26), "wherefore" (348), "because" (1209), "so" (1689), "then" (2168), "for" (8986), etc.
  - E. Considering context means asking who? whom? why? what? when? where? etc.
    1. Ask **who**? To identify the speaker or writer i.e. Daniel 3:25; Paul's internal conflict in Romans 7; Job and his friends in Job 32:1-3; and Moses in Psalm 90.
    2. Ask **whom**? To identify the hearer or reader i.e. Leviticus 10:9; Mark 16:15-18; John 8:7; I Timothy 5:22; II Timothy 4:5; James 1:21; 5:20; II Peter 3:9; Revelation 3:20.
    3. Ask **why**? To identify the reason for the text i.e. Joshua 24:15; Malachi 2:16; Matthew 7:1; Luke 10:29-37; 15:3-32; John 9:3; I Corinthians 7:26; II Cor 6:13; Galatians 1:15.
    4. Ask **when**? To identify the timing of the text i.e. Matthew 23:1-3; Acts 2:20,40; 15:20; Revelation 17:18.
    5. Ask **what**? To identify the nature of the text i.e. Song of Solomon; Luke 16:1-8; Daniel and Revelation.
    6. Ask **where**? To identify the location of writer or audience i.e. Acts 15:1-2.
- V. The illustration of this rule gives examples of popular texts used out of context by teachers.
- A. The Old Testament prophets must be carefully studied in context as to the timing and object of their writings, for many leap thousands of years into the future without right.
    1. When Isaiah 43:4-7 speaks of God regathering Israel together, we should not think of modern Zionism and other Jewish fables. Isaiah prophesied 2500 years ago about God's recovery of Judah from the Babylonian captivity. Compare Isaiah 43:14-17; 44:21-28; 45:1-4. It was future to them, not us.

2. When Haggai 2:6-7 speaks of God shaking the heavens and earth and filling His house with glory, we need not send funds to Tel Aviv for a construction loan. We must reject the fanciful speculations of the Jew C.I. Scofield and other modern Pharisees. Jesus Christ, the Desire of all nations, has already come and filled that house with glory. Paul confirms it as ancient history (Heb 12:25-29).
- B. Many have used the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) to teach that Jesus taught a higher and gentler system of religion than the Law. This is heresy and misses His message.
    1. We rather understand Jesus correcting the abuses of the Law made by the Pharisees. Consider His words, "Ye have heard that it hath been said." He did not say, "It is written." He redefined the Law of Moses as God had intended.
    2. His stated purpose was to justify and fulfill the Law of God given to Moses and others (Matt 5:17-20). And He condemned any teacher that might minimize it.
    3. When we read, "Resist not evil" (Matt 5:39), we understand from the context that Jesus is condemning personal revenge for minor offences. He was not modifying, even in the slightest degree, legitimate revenge by parental authority, church discipline, or civil judgment. An "eye for an eye" was still right, civilly!
  - C. When the book of Hebrews is understood as a warning of severe and irremediable judgment to Jewish Christians tempted to return to Moses, it loses many of its difficulties and takes on a fresh, Christ-honoring, practical value. Where many sincere saints have quaked at Hebrews 2:1-3; 6:4-6; and 10:26-31; there has been no sound reason for such fear given the intent of this book and these "Hebrew" passages.
  - D. Since baptism for the dead cannot be taught in I Corinthians 15:29 as the Mormons teach it (rule #1), the context of bodily resurrection indicates Paul's practical appeal to the figurative aspects of death and resurrection in immersion.
  - E. Since Galatians 5:4 cannot teach the loss of legal salvation, we look at the context and see men justified by the law there also. Clearly, Paul is dealing with the doctrinal position of those who had confidence in the law. The fall from grace is set equal to justification by the law; and since one is in the understanding only, the other is as well.
  - F. While we know I John 2:2 cannot teach universal redemption (rule #1), knowing the who and whom indicates John writing to Jews regarding Gentile atonement (Gal 2:9).
  - G. The temple of the Holy Spirit in I Corinthians 3:16-17 is the church at Corinth, and the works that could be burned up are ministerial works (3:12-15). All we must do to ascertain this is to consider the context of builders (I Cor 3:1-11). The temple of the Holy Spirit in I Corinthians 6:19 is another temple by its very different context.
- VI. Context can also give added value and significance to the understanding and glory of a text.
- A. The words "more sure" of II Peter 1:19 take on special significance, when they are understood in light of God's voice from heaven described in 1:16-18.
  - B. Charity means much more to us in I Corinthians 13, when we understand its superiority to the greatest gifts in the New Testament church (I Corinthians 12:28-31).
  - C. The practical exhortations of Romans 12:1-2 and Ephesians 4:1 mean much more to us, when we consider the "therefore" with the preceding "Amen."
- VII. Context must include even the simple analysis of pronouns and their antecedents.
- A. For example, the "them" of Psalm 105:37 must refer backward to Israel (105:23) or forward to the enemies of Egypt (105:38).
  - B. Did Baasha kill Jeroboam (I Kings 16:7)? Or did he kill Nadab (I Kings 15:25-28)?
  - C. Did the commandments of God persecute David (Ps 119:86)? Or did the proud?
  - D. Did the centurion or his sick servant send for Jesus (Luke 7:1-3)? Read ahead.

- VIII. Context must also include the proper identification of persons or places under different names.
- A. Hebrews 4:12 must be speaking of the living Word of God, the Second Person in the Trinity, due to the personal reference to Jesus Christ that follows. Using this text to teach characteristics of the written Scriptures violates the context horribly, detracts from the glory of Jesus Christ, and ascribes power to the Bible that it does not have.
  - B. What did Jesus bring in with Israel's fathers into the land of the Gentiles (Acts 7:45)?
  - C. Why didn't Jesus give His people rest, and why did He speak of another day (Heb 4:8)?
  - D. Where is the city of Ariel (Isaiah 29:1-2,7)? What but context helps us in such places?
  - E. When will David rule Israel again (Jeremiah 30:9; Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Hos 3:5)?
  - F. When did you last pray to Jacob with an exclamatory prayer (Psalm 24:6)?
- IX. By asking who and when of Old Testament prophecies quoted by New Testament writers, we may identify "prophetic perspective" and determine the true fulfillment of prophecies.
1. When prophecies are quoted later, consider the future tense very carefully.
  2. Peter said of God in Acts 2:17-21, "I will pour out of my Spirit . . . and I will shew wonders in heaven." But Joel wrote those words many years earlier about Pentecost (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16). Consider Charismatic emphasis on this text for today.
  3. James said of God in Acts 15:16-17, "I will return and will build again the tabernacle of David." But Amos wrote these words earlier about the conversion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:13-15). Consider the Premillennialists.
  4. Paul said of the Jews in Romans 11:26-27, "There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer." But Isaiah wrote these words many years earlier about the coming of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 59:20; Acts 3:25-26). Consider the Premillennialists.
  5. Paul said of God in Hebrews 8:8-12, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel." But Jeremiah wrote these words many years earlier about the new covenant in Jesus Christ (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:13; 9:1; 12:24). The new covenant is old!
  6. Paul said of God in Hebrews 12:26, "Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven." But Haggai wrote these words many years earlier about the end of the law economy (Haggai 2:6-7; Hebrews 8:13; 9:10; 12:25-29). Things have been shaken!
- X. Context determines grammar: though this thought horribly crushes the narrow minds of many.
1. Remember, the context of a word determines which definition and spelling we need. It is usually about the second or third grade when you need words used in sentences.
  2. Consider the difference between subjective-genitive and objective-genitive phrases.
    - a. Does Haggai 2:7 teach that God will bring someone who desires all nations?
    - b. Does Daniel 11:37 teach that the enemy king of Israel would be celibate?
    - c. Does James 2:1 teach that our brethren were justified by Jesus Christ's faith?
    - d. Does Luke 11:42 teach us not to neglect the preaching of God's love for us?
    - e. Does I Timothy 3:6 warn of the danger of novices being rebuked by the devil?
    - f. We will consider more grammatical constructions under that specific rule.
  3. Consider the necessity of seeing figures of speech where the context requires them.
    - a. Does Matthew 14:19 teach that Jesus gave the disciples to the multitude?
    - b. Does Proverbs 20:16 teach that wise men should make loans to strange women?
    - c. Does Malachi 1:9 teach that rebel sinners ought to pray for God's grace?
    - d. Does Joshua 24:19 teach that some people just cannot worship the true God?
    - e. Does I Corinthians 11:24 teach that the communion bread is the body of Jesus?
    - f. We will consider many more figures of speech under that specific rule of study.

- XI. For further learning, practice, and spiritual entertainment, consider these popular false pretexts!
1. Does Genesis 4:1 teach that Adam did not get to know Eve until after the fall? How do you come to the right sense of the word “know” without context?
  2. Does Deuteronomy 23:18 teach Christians not to sell dogs and tithe the income?
  3. Does Proverbs 23:29 condemn strange women? Fighting? Football? Or wine?
  4. Does Proverbs 23:31 condemn looking at wine? What if the next table orders some?
  5. Does Proverbs 20:30 teach the importance of a “six-pack stomach” for good health?
  6. Does Job 31:1 condemn thinking about female employees? What about raises?
  7. Did the Jews in Malachi 3:1 truly “seek” and “delight” in the Lord and His Messenger?
  8. Does Daniel 3:25 teach the doctrine of the eternal sonship of our Lord Jesus Christ?
  9. Does I Corinthians 6:19-20 condemn smoking? Drinking alcohol? Too much candy?
  10. Does I Corinthians 7:8 condemn marriage or commend singles? Find the context.
  11. Does Psalm 150:4 justify the use of organs in worshipping God?
  12. Does Revelation 14:2 justify the use of harps in worshipping God?
  13. Does II Peter 3:9 teach that God is not willing that any should perish?
  14. Did Paul truly want to see all of Israel saved with a fervent heart (Romans 10:1)?
  15. Does Romans 13:1-7 teach ministerial authority and giving to the pastor?
  16. Does Acts 2:38 teach that the gift of the Holy Ghost is church membership from Him?
  17. Does Revelation 3:20 teach that Jesus stands and begs at unregenerate men’s hearts?
  18. When will the Day of the Lord in Isaiah 13:6 take place? Before or after the rapture?
  19. When will the Day of the Lord in Ezekiel 30:3 take place? Before or after the rapture?
  20. When will the Day of the Lord in Joel 2:31 take place? Before or after the antichrist?
  21. When will the Day of the Lord in Zephaniah 1:7 take place? Before or after the rapture?
  22. When will the Day of the Lord in Malachi 4:1 take place? Before or after the rapture?
  23. Does John 1:12 teach that we are born again by believing on the name of Jesus?
  24. Does Ephesians 1:3 teach that the spiritual blessings in Christ are accessed by baptism?
  25. Does James 4:4 teach that the beloved brethren of the Jews were all adulterers?
  26. Does Luke 21:33 teach the doctrine of the preservation of Scripture?
  27. Does Matthew 24:13 teach the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints?