

# Systematic Theology for the Local Church

## #9—Interpreting the Bible—Part VIII<sup>1</sup>

### Learning to See Whole Messages: The Place of Context

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For upcoming studies in Bibliology: Begin to get familiar with Sections 6-12 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Read all of Packer's *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*. Packer's book was written against the background of the debate with Fundamentalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, his presentation of the systems of authority (reason, tradition and Scripture) is timeless. Also, begin to read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, chapter 1, which deals with revelation, and chapter 5, which deals with the Bible as the basis for life.

Looking back: Study Section 4 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* as a review of studies #7 and #8 concerning covenant theology.

I begin this last introductory study with what I consider to be a very powerful illustration of the value of paying attention to context. It involves a problem that is solved by context. I came across this specific solution only recently. Here is 2 Pet. 3:1-10 (I have highlighted the key verse):

3:1 Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. <sup>2</sup> I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

<sup>3</sup> First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. <sup>4</sup> They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." <sup>5</sup> But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. <sup>6</sup> By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. <sup>7</sup> By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

<sup>8</sup> But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. <sup>9</sup> **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**

<sup>10</sup> But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

Verse 9 appears to teach that it is God's desire that all human beings come to repentance, that is, become saved. The Pelagian uses this verse to support his view that it is ultimately up to individuals whether they get saved or not.

Yet experience and history show us that not everyone is saved. According to the Pelagians, those who aren't saved are lost either because they didn't hear the gospel message or because they heard it and decided on their own to reject it. However, what does this say about God's desire? Some have tried to get explain the verse by saying that there are different levels within God's will. God wants everyone to be saved, but some refuse and God allows this. I was taught this early in my Christian life. Notice that if this view were true, it would actually cast doubt on God's ability to fulfill His own desire, that is, if one holds that God actually wants everyone to be saved, then the verse seems it seems to negate His ability to save anyone.

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This verse also seems to present a problem for the five-point Calvinist, who believes that the Bible teaches elsewhere that election is truly unconditional (I do not believe that the so-called four-point Calvinist can hold to unconditional election, although he says he does) and is God's sovereign work, that is, that God chooses some to be saved and others cannot be saved. Why would He be waiting for everyone if some cannot be saved? In addition, if in the view of the five-point Calvinist God's plan is to save only the elect, then the Cross-work of Christ was designed only to save a subset of humanity (this is 'particular redemption'). Verses 8 and 9 together indicate that God is allowing time for some group of people to be saved before He brings this age to a close (as described starting in v. 10). If He only made provision for the salvation of some, then why would He be waiting for 'all' to come to repentance?

So, if one is a Pelagian, the verse appears to teach that coming to Christ is ultimately based on human will, yet requires that we see God as failing to achieve His desires. But if one is a five-point Calvinist, the verse has the potential of negating the view that election is not based on human will and that the Bible teaches particular redemption. The Pelagian likes the verse, but has to explain how God's will can be thwarted. On the other hand, the verse seems to undermine the position of the five-point Calvinist.

But let's look carefully at the verse and its context. The main topic is that God allows time to continue so that some people can be saved. The ones that can come to repentance during this time—'everyone'—are those God is patient with, the ones He doesn't want to perish. But Peter addresses these people as 'you.' Who does the word 'you' refer to? It must be the same group as the 'dear friends' in v. 8. Who are the dear friends? They have to be the same ones as the 'dear friends' in 3:1—the readers of this and Peter's first letter and the ones he describes in 1 Pet. 1:1 as 'God's elect.' So Peter is writing to people that are saved and have thus demonstrated that they are elect and to people that he believes will be saved—given enough time—because they are elect. Thus 2 Pet. 3:9 means that God's plan positions the point of the second coming and day of the Lord (3:10) after a period of time that allows for all the elect to come to Christ. This answers the question of 3:4: "Where is this 'coming' he promised?"

Thus the context clearly shows who is the object of God's patience: the elect. The verse does not at all teach that human beings are ultimately responsible for whether they are saved or not. Nor does it impugn God's sovereignty. Verse 9 actually supports unconditional election and particular redemption, since it shows that God's design is to save the elect. This verse provides no support for the view that God's will can in any way be thwarted.

## A definition

*Context* in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.\*<sup>2</sup>

For example, in this definition 'ment' is part of the context of 'docu,' 'a' and 'of' are the immediate context of 'portion,' and all the other words in the sentence are the context of 'surroundings.' This definition does not specify the size of the environment. It is all the elements (parts of words or larger) that precede or follow a segment, as well as all that writer/speaker and reader/hearer may consider relevant to their interaction by means of language, such as knowledge of the world, awareness of possible responses to the message, etc. This is equally true of the biblical text. A biblical context can be a small amount of text, or the whole Bible or more. Actually, the whole Bible is relevant in some way to every other portion. This definition of context does not tell us how to find what is more or less relevant. There are no fixed rules that help. Interestingly enough, linguists are just now beginning to formalize procedures for determining what kinds of things are relevant to portions of utterances or texts and how they bear upon stretches of language.

<sup>2</sup> You should master definitions in this series that are marked with an asterisk.

## General principles

Let's think about how we can fail to consider context in interpreting the Bible and coming to theological conclusions. Here are some examples:

- If we read 1 Chr. 26:18 by itself we are left hanging: "As for the court to the west, there were four at the road and two at the court itself." What is this talking about!?
- Some have read Mt. 24:13 by itself and concluded that (in any age) a person must cling to his salvation to the end, and could potentially lose it: "But he who stands firm to the end will be saved."
- And taking Mt. 24:17 by itself and applying it to just any situation in the present age would lead to nonsense: "Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house."
- It would be even more dangerous to take Jas. 2:24 by itself, since it would lead us to conclude that works can save: "A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone."
- Many have read 1 Jn. 2:27 in isolation and concluded that they could understand the whole Bible on their own without assistance from anyone, ignoring the revelation elsewhere that gifted individuals are given to the Body of Christ to teach others: "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him."

The problem in all of these is that the reader attempted to interpret a segment of text without reference to the other parts that also existed, parts that the writer or other writers intended to be a unit.

How can the Bible interpreter best pay attention to context? First, one should know the context that is the whole book in which a particular passage is found. In some study Bibles and commentaries, outlines or overviews help us to see a book as a whole. For example, when the reader realizes that the whole book of Philippians was intended as a thank-you letter to believers who had given money to him, then a verse such as 1:5 ("your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now") can be interpreted correctly as we pay optimum attention to surroundings (the whole book). Since the "partnership" of 1:5 includes giving, we learn that supporting a ministry makes us part of it.

Second, knowledge of parallel books, that is, those that contain the same material as a book under study, is always helpful. Jude and Second Peter appear to speak to common themes and situations, as do Ephesians and Colossians. Parallels are often quite evident in the Gospels, and books providing parallel listings of all four Gospels are very useful.

Third, a simple way to maximize context is to examine what precedes and follows verses or words in question. This alone would solve most of the problems associated with some people's interpretation of those verses listed above. In 1 Jn. 2:27, for instance, we find that John is trying to show his readers that they are in danger of being led astray by false teachers. However, believers are under no obligation whatsoever to pay attention to them, since as God's children they have the Holy Spirit within them to carry out a perfect teaching ministry. Similarly, a superficial reading of Phil. 2:12 might lead a person to conclude that he is ultimately responsible to procure and maintain his own salvation: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling . . ." Looking further (to 2:13, for instance) will show that what is really at issue is cooperation with God in the process of sanctification: "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." And so v. 12 is actually speaking about our practice and not about our basic position before God.

## Jesus' use of context

The example of our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us to be very careful with contexts. In Lk. 20:27-38 He asserts that in some way “Moses showed that the dead rise” when he wrote in Ex. 3:6 that the One who met with him at the burning bush was “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Here is the text:

<sup>27</sup> Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. <sup>28</sup> “Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. <sup>29</sup> Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. <sup>30</sup> The second <sup>31</sup> and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. <sup>32</sup> Finally, the woman died too. <sup>33</sup> Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

<sup>34</sup> Jesus replied, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. <sup>35</sup> But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, <sup>36</sup> and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. <sup>37</sup> But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ <sup>38</sup> He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

We should ask initially how this statement proves resurrection (a point Jesus was making to counter the Sadducees, who did not believe in bodily resurrection). When we look at Ex. 3, we discover that the main point of the passage is that God is at long last coming to fulfill His covenants to Abraham and his descendents. He made everlasting promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, promises that He would surely keep. So he reveals himself as the “I am,” the self-existent God who has the authority and power to back up His word. The fulfillment of the promises of eternal blessings to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—now dead—would depend on an act by that omnipotent God to bring them back to life. The picture is actually quite simple: no resurrection after death, no enjoyment of the covenants. Or we could state this as a logical argument: God made promises of future blessing on earth; God always keeps His promises; to enjoy such blessings one must be alive; those who received the blessings are now physically dead; therefore, there will be a future resurrection of individuals by the power of God.

The point here for our purposes is that our Lord knew the background of the verse He quoted, Ex. 3:6. That background, *the context of that verse*, was crucial for the argument He was making concerning the reality of bodily resurrection. Since we are in many places exhorted to be like our Lord, we ought to be as careful as He was in paying attention to the contributions of context.

Contextual elements—authorship, purpose for writing, characteristics of people involved, historical framework, places, customs and objects of culture, economic and political characteristics—all contribute to our understanding of the biblical text. The Bible student should make use of the many published works that shed light on backgrounds to the biblical texts. Among these are Bible dictionaries, introductions to the Old Testament and New Testament, geographies, atlases and commentaries.

When we say that a precious jewel is more valuable in an appropriate and attractive setting, we are enunciating the principle that surroundings make significant contributions to something that is already valuable. In the case of the Bible, the surroundings are interwoven in such a way that they contribute in incalculable ways to the invaluable biblical text. They cannot be ignored.

**Study questions drawn from the Gospel of John. Attempt to do these without looking at the answers on the next page.**

Many of these questions can be answered by the use of Bible study tools (such as a Bible dictionary) that will direct you to information in a near or distant context.

1. The character of John's Gospel, in terms of its form and literary aspects, is quite different from that of the first three Gospels. What bearing might 20:30-31 have on this?

Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

2. Many Bible books are anonymous, but where the author is known it is of value to be aware of the writer's background, profession, circumstances of writing, age, the place of writing, etc. In the case of John's Gospel, the author is never explicitly identified. Is there any information somewhere (i.e., in some context that might help us)?
3. Culture is all the ways, tools, and institutions that a social group uses in its life. These elements contribute to interpretation that pays attention to context. For example, in Jn. 13-17 John portrays the so-called Upper Room Discourse. Something of the nature of that time together can be grasped when we learn that second-story rooms in homes were often larger than lower rooms and were used for group meetings, feasts, or meditation and prayer.

Why did the Jews make the request that they did in Jn. 19:31? Here is the request:

"Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down."

4. The statement in Jn. 2:6 concerning the presence of six stone water jars containing water for ceremonial washing is puzzling until we realize that there is a custom found in the social context. What is it?
5. Closely connected with cultural features in the process of interpretation are historical and archaeological details. What social and historical factors centered on Nicodemus might help us see why Jesus spoke to this particular man about the new birth?
6. The apparently unexplained statement in Jn. 4:4 concerning the necessity of Jesus' traveling through Samaria and the accompanying racially connected statements made by the woman in 4:9-10 are illumined by certain well-known details of Israel's history. These are part of the historical context of the incident. What are they?

## Answers

1. This stated purpose for writing, connected here with Thomas' confession, ought to alert us to distinctive features of the book. John did not write in order to cover every event of Jesus' life. Instead, he was selective, as he states in v. 30. He did not record all the miracles Jesus performed, but highlighted seven acts done in the presence of the disciples. His stated purpose is to move individuals to belief in the Son of God. This is different, for example, from Matthew's goal, which was to present Jesus as King. Consequently, we are not surprised to find the word 'believe' used about a hundred times in John's gospel, and the key use of the word 'life.' John gives his readers, then, a focused purpose for his writing.
2. We have in 21:20 of a "disciple whom Jesus loved." At least this individual must have had intimate knowledge of our Lord's life and ministry. We are also told that he had been sitting next to Jesus at the supper on the eve of Jesus' death. Further, in 20:2 we discover that the same individual was with Peter at the tomb on the resurrection morning. And 20:8 records that "the other disciple . . . saw and believed." Since in Acts 3:1 Peter's companion is John, we are led to believe that the writer of John's gospel and the disciple John are one and the same, especially considering that the author might have been reluctant to mention that he was the "disciple whom Jesus loved." Thus context enables us to reach a likely conclusion as to the identity of the author of this anonymous book.
3. The particular Jewish custom behind the request of Jn. 19:31 stemmed from Dt. 21:22-23. There God pronounced the executed criminal to be a source of pollution for the land if left to hang overnight. Thus, ironically enough, the Jewish leaders feared leaving Jesus on the cross overnight, even though they unwittingly brought judgment on themselves in putting Him there (see Gal. 3:13).
4. Water was "purified" by the Jews by letting it sit in jugs. This kind of helpful insight can be found in a Bible dictionary or encyclopedia.
5. The account becomes much more transparent to us when we know something about Nicodemus' background. Significantly, the first verse reveals that he was a Pharisee. This made him a member of a Jewish cult that became prominent in the second century B.C. By the first century A.D. its members numbered about six thousand. They believed in immortality and resurrection, neither of which the Sadducees held to. They made their interpretations of the law binding on Jews of their day. Thus our Lord's statement in 3:10 has great significance. He identifies Nicodemus as 'the teacher in Israel' ('Israel's teacher' in the NIV). As such he should have understood the need for a spiritual birth in order to get into the presence of God. But he did not. And if *he* didn't, certainly no one else would. Thus a prominent teacher and Pharisee was leading the people astray. The spiritual bankruptcy of that dominant religious and cultural group is thus highlighted in a very powerful way by our Lord's perception of Nicodemus' dullness.
6. In 931 B.C. Jeroboam revolted against Rehoboam. Attempting to keep the twelve tribes divided, he separated his people from Jerusalem and set up independent worship. Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom (Israel/Ephraim) during the divided-kingdom period, and scene of part of the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, had been captured by the Assyrians in 721. These conquerors brought in colonists who mixed with the Jewish inhabitants. The descendants were the Samaritans of the New Testament. The significant fact in Jn. 4 is John's aside in v. 9, where he explains that the woman's surprise at Jesus' request for a drink is due to the prohibition of social interaction between Jew and Samaritan. Jesus' overriding of this barrier is an important part of His spiritually oriented contact with her. His concern and power to heal spiritual hurt transcend the hostility built up over centuries of separation between once unified peoples.