
The New How to Study Your Bible

*Discover the Life-Changing
Approach to God's Word*

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The Rule of Context— Context Rules!



Now, let's sit down and begin. And where do you begin? You begin by observing the text as a whole. By the text we mean whatever portion of Scripture you want to study. We suggest you study the Bible book by book, because each book of the Bible is a complete message in and of itself that in turn relates in a special way to the whole Word of God. So choose your text—a book of the Bible—and then keep the following principles before you.

❁ STEP ONE ❁

Begin with Prayer

You are about to learn the most effective method of Bible study there is. Yet apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, that's all it will be—a method.

John 16:13-15 tells us that the One who guides us into all truth, the One who takes the things of God and reveals them to us, is the Holy Spirit, our resident Teacher. So ask God, by His Spirit, to lead you into all truth and to open your eyes that you may behold wondrous things out of His Word (see Psalm 119:18 KJV). Begin with prayer—and continue with an attitude of prayer.

STEP TWO*Identify the Context*

Inductive study begins with a thorough evaluation of the context.

One of the most important principles of handling the Word properly and studying the Bible inductively is to interpret Scripture in the light of its context. Why? Because *context always rules in interpretation*.

The word *context* means “that which goes with the text.” In general, then, context is the environment in which something dwells, the setting in which something exists or occurs. Remember the tadpole in the creek? Context is the creek!

In Bible study, context is the words, phrases, and sentences surrounding a particular word, phrase, or sentence. This context gives meaning to the particular word, phrase, or sentence and helps you understand what the author is saying. Context can also be expanded to paragraphs, chapters, books, and eventually the whole Bible. Because context rules in, or determines, the interpretation of the passage, it is important for you to know the context of any passage that you’re studying.

To illustrate how context gives meaning to words, let’s look at the word *trunk*. Suppose someone were to ask you, “What does the word *trunk* mean?” How would you respond? Well, if you were going to give a helpful as well as an accurate answer, you would first have to ask, “How is the word used?” because the word *trunk* can mean different things.

A trunk could mean the luggage compartment of a car, the flexible snout of an elephant, a large rigid piece of luggage used for transporting clothing and personal effects, the main stem of a tree, or shorts worn for swimming.

Therefore, the only way to know the intended meaning of the word *trunk* is to examine the context in which the word is used. The environment (the surrounding text) in which the word appears will show you which of these possible meanings is intended.

For instance, what would the word *trunk* mean in the following account from a trip to Africa?

I remember seeing this huge trunk appear before the window of our car. We had been informed to always line up our car in the same direction in which the elephant was

going, in case he charged at our vehicle. As we saw this trunk swinging back and forth and the elephant’s face coming closer, we knew it was time to leave!

Since context is “that which surrounds or goes with the text,” what information in this passage gives us a proper understanding of the word *trunk* as it is used here?

Well, we see that the word “elephant” appears twice, and the trunk is described as “huge” and “swinging back and forth.” By examining the context, therefore, we discover the facts that surround the use of this word and can determine that in this particular passage the word *trunk* means “the flexible snout of an elephant.”

In inductive study, context is determined or identified in the same way—by carefully observing what is repeated in the text and seeing how it all relates. If you observe what is said and pay attention to the repeated words, phrases, or ideas, you’ll clearly see the context in any book, chapter, or passage that you’re studying.

Context is determined or identified by thorough, careful observation of the text. Therefore...

❁ STEP THREE ❁

Observe the Obvious

When you observe the text, *begin by looking for things that are obvious—* in other words, *things that are easy to see.*

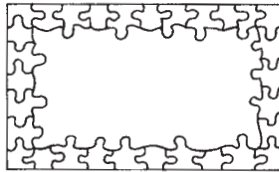
Facts about people, places, and events always capture our attention; therefore, people, places, and events are easy to see. Since these kinds of facts are often repeated, this also makes them easy to see.

If you keep your focus on the obvious, you will discover significant or repeated ideas; these will, in turn, show you the context of the book, chapter, passage, or verse you are studying.

For example, if you decide to put together a rectangular jigsaw puzzle, where do you start? Which pieces do you look for first? The four corners, of course! Why? Because they are obvious: There are only four of them, and they are easy to find because they have two straight sides.



Once you identify the four corners, what do you look for next? Naturally, you look for the next most obvious things: the straight edges. Once again, they're the easiest pieces to find because each has one straight side!



By the time you have connected the straight edges, you have an outline or framework within which to put the other pieces together. You have established the context for the puzzle by looking for the obvious.

In a similar fashion, looking for the obvious facts, details, or ideas establishes the framework in studying a book, chapter, or passage of the Bible. So to put together a framework for the text, begin with the things that are obvious in that book.

As you observe the text and discover the context, however, you must always...

STEP FOUR

Deal with the Text Objectively

In other words, let the text speak for itself. Observing the text in order to establish context must be your primary objective, so let the text itself show you its repeated emphasis.

So often I fear our only reason for being in the Word is subjective—we simply want to get something for ourselves. To look for something that

“ministers to our heart”—or to find a verse we can use to help someone or set someone straight.

How grievous this must be to God, who wants us to truly know Him and to be sanctified (set apart) by truth—and His Word is truth (John 17:17). Therefore, our primary goal—our driving passion—should be to know truth and then adjust our beliefs and our lives accordingly.

Now granted, certain portions of any book you are studying might minister to you more than other portions, but the truth and context never change. The message of the book itself will always be the same. It is truth—absolutes on which you can stake your life, your character, and your lifestyle.

So first, look at the Word objectively.

Yes, God’s Word will minister to you personally. It will! It’s a living Word. But to discover the context, you must first look at the text objectively to discover the repeated emphasis of the author. Then, when you personalize the Word, you’ll know you are applying it correctly. And that’s imperative.

Now as I say this, I must also caution you not to fail to look at Scripture subjectively as well. When you pause to reflect on what God is saying and how it applies to you, that is when God the Holy Spirit quickens His Word to your heart; that is when you know He has a message especially for you at a specific point in your life.

At the same time that you study the Bible inductively, read it devotionally. By devotionally I mean with a heart that wants to hear what God is saying to you. God speaks to us personally through His Word. Therefore, as you read and as you study, don’t fail to take time to listen to your God.

❁ STEP FIVE ❁

Read with a Purpose

Reading with a purpose is accomplished by asking questions of the text. You must interrogate the text as a detective would a witness.

To get the whole story—all the details—journalists are taught to ask the “5 W’s and an H” (*who, what, when, where, why, and how*) in their reporting.

If you are going to read the Bible with purpose—to get all the details—you must ask the 5 W’s and an H. Therefore, as you read, ask...

Who wrote it? *Who* said it? *Who* are the major characters? *Who* are the people mentioned? To *whom* is the author speaking? About *whom* is he speaking?

What are the main events? *What* are the major ideas? *What* are the major teachings? *What* are these people like? *What* does he talk about the most? *What* is his purpose in saying that?

When was it written? *When* did this event take place? *When* will it happen? *When* did he say it? *When* did he do it?

Where was this done? *Where* was this said? *Where* will it happen?

Why was there a need for this to be written? *Why* was this mentioned? *Why* was so much or so little space devoted to this particular event or teaching? *Why* was this reference mentioned? *Why* should they do such and such?

How is it done? *How* did it happen? *How* is this truth illustrated?

When you ask the 5 W’s and an H of the text, and when you let the text provide the answers, you’ll be amazed at what you learn. These questions are the building blocks of precise observation which, remember, lay a solid foundation for accurate interpretation.

Many times Scripture is simply misinterpreted because the context isn’t carefully observed. Accurate answers from the text to the 5 W’s and an H kinds of questions will help assure correct interpretation.

Let me illustrate this by simply using one verse:

“After these things Jesus was walking in Galilee; for He was unwilling to walk in Judea because the Jews were seeking to kill Him” (John 7:1).

As we interrogate the text with the 5 W’s and an H, we discover that...

“Jesus” answers the question, “*Who* is this about?”

“Was walking” answers the question, “*What* was He doing?”

“In Galilee, not Judea” answers the question, “*Where* was He walking?”

“Because the Jews were seeking to kill Him” tells us, “*Why* was He not in Judea?”

“After these things” tells us, “*When* was this action taking place?”

“*What* things?” The things that took place in the previous verses.

That is how you use the questioning technique of the 5 W’s and an H. And the more you do it, the more it will become a habit, until asking these questions becomes second nature to you as you study God’s awesome book.

Now, and this is important, don’t think you have to find all 5 W’s and an H every time you question a passage, because they’re not always going to be there. For example, the verse above, John 7:1, did not answer an “H” question.

Simply read the text and answer all the 5 W’s and an H questions you can.

Remember, every part of the entire process of inductive Bible study is based on asking who, what, when, where, why, and how kinds of questions. This is how vital the 5 W’s and an H are!

Now, my friend, that you know the principles behind observation, let’s move on to the process of observing the text. As you begin to do this, you’re going to be excited by what you learn. And you’ll probably find yourself saying, “I can’t believe what I’ve seen all by myself!”

