

RESURRECTION OPC – ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL
Hermeneutics: How to Read the Bible

WEEK 4 | MAY 15, 2016

Introduction & Acknowledgement

In our first session, we looked at an overall approach to reading Scripture modeled on the analogy of a compass. The goal of the compass is that we read Scripture *contextually, grammatically, theologically, and doxologically*.

In our last session, we looked at how we interpret the words of Scripture both as the very words of God and as words expressed in human languages. As the former, they are perfect, true, living, and active. As also the latter, they bear all the qualities of words in real languages: they have semantic range, are subject to semantic development, may be used figuratively, and must be read in context.

Today, we further explore the importance of *context*. In so doing, we are continuing to follow closely the lectures of Dr. Benjamin Shaw, based on Louis Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*.

Context, Context, Context!

*"Three minutes' thought would suffice to find this out; but thought is irksome and three minutes is a long time."
(A. E. Housman, Saturae of Juvenal)*

"Context of Philippians 4:13 Officially Abandoned"

- Consider this recent online satire (Bradford Green, RUF – The Bablyon Bee on 2016/04/01):

"According to multiple sources, Evangelicals across the nation have quietly confirmed that the one thing Christ will not strengthen them to do is understand the context of Philippians 4:13. As of Friday it has officially been abandoned... 'Seems pretty clear cut,' shrugged local Christian Dan Jeffries. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" – that's it.' Pressed to define 'all things,' Jeffries laughed nervously. 'Come on, it's obvious. It means, like, what I want to do. The other day it was 225 on the bench, and I nailed it. God is so good!"

... Reporters found local man Dan Hansborough reading his Bible in a local coffee shop after the announcement, and he was defiant. 'Of course I know the context! Philippians 4:13 is my life verse. It's my mantra when I'm struggling to stay on task online, or stay awake in a movie, or even when I have to take the trash out and it's really heavy. Wait, what does "context" mean again?"

- In a humorous way, this article highlights a very real issue: "The division into chapters and verses can often interfere with seeing the development of a writer's thought through a section. Even the division of the text into paragraphs that is common in modern English versions can mislead the reader, because the reader may focus on only one paragraph and ignore the material before and after." (Shaw)

Historical Context: Mind the Gap

- The Old Testament records events/peoples who lived in the Ancient Near East (ANE) from c. 3000-300 BC. In studying the OT, therefore, *it is very important for us to remember our chronological/cultural distance*.
- Three centers of civilization dominated the ANE period:
 - Mesopotamia – Sumerians, Old Babylonians, Old Assyrians; Neo-Babylonians, Neo-Assyrians, Persians
 - Egypt – an international power for almost all the OT period
 - Canaan – Hittite Empire, Ugaritic kingdom, Philistines
- Awareness of these civilizations, in their various iterations, sheds light on our OT reading:
 - Geography – Israel lay along the major trade routes of powerful neighbors
 - Literacy – Ugaritic poetry (vocabulary, parallelism) has informed study of the Psalms
 - Migration – borders vast and less-precise, making it hard to control movement of peoples
 - Technology – Philistines possessed iron technology that Israelites had not acquired
 - Polytheism – a constant threatening influence to Israel
 - Politics – study of Hittite treaties sheds light on the structure of Deuteronomy
- Between the OT and NT periods, the Persians were succeeded by the Greeks and then by the Romans.
- For a brief survey of this period, check out our brief article on "The Intertestamental Period" in *The English Bible: a Concise Guide* – available at: <http://www.resurrectionopc.org/media/print/english.bible.2015.pdf>.

Text & Context: Look for Clues!

- Like all extensive writing, Scripture is divided into sections. How do we identify section divisions?
- Transitional Conjunctions:
 - Words like ‘then’, ‘therefore’, etc. are often indicators of section breaks.
 - For example, note the following transitional conjunctions in the letter to the Philippians:
 - 1.27: “Only let your manner of life be worthy...”
 - 2.1: “So if there is any encouragement in Christ...”
 - 2.12: “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed...”
 - 3.1: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord...”
 - 4.1: “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown...”
 - 4.8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable...”
 - 4.14: “Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble...”
 - Transitional conjunctions are frequently seen in the epistles.
- Transitional Content:
 - Sometimes transitions are marked not by conjunctions, but by content:
 - Matthew 4.25-5.1:
 - “^{4.25}And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. ^{5.1}Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him...”
 - Matthew 7.28-8.1:
 - “^{7.28}And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes. ^{8.1}When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him...”
 - Content-indicated transitions are frequently seen in narrative.
- Poetic/Prophetic Transitions:
 - In poetry or prophecy, section breaks are more difficult to discern. Yet there are some clues to watch for:
 - *Inclusio*:
 - When a term or phrase is repeated at the beginning and end of a section...
 - Ex: Psalm 26 is bookended by “I have walked” (v. 1) and “I shall walk” (v. 11) “in my integrity.”
 - *Changes in Subject/Object*:
 - A change in the subject or object of a sentence may mark a sectional transition...
 - Isaiah 52.12-13:
 - “¹²For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight, for the LORD will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard. ¹³Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.”

LEGOs vs. Tupperware

- Identifying section divisions is intended to help us see the logical/narrative progression of an author’s thought. But just like individual LEGOs are meant to be assembled, so sections in a book work together.
- For example:
 - Phil 2.1-5: exhortation to humble thinking – *is informed by what follows...*
 - Phil 2.6-11: the example of Christ’s humility – *informs our thinking and our behavior!*
 - Phil 2.12-14: exhortation to humble behavior – *is informed by what precedes...*
- It’s also important to see individual sections in light of the teaching of the whole book. For example, 2 Samuel 13-20 are best interpreted as the fulfillment of Nathan’s prophecy in 2 Samuel 12.
- What we want to avoid is taking verses or paragraphs out of their surrounding context. We should not treat Scripture like food that can be chopped up and stored in separate Tupperware containers.

Determining the Theme: Prayer & Thought

- The best aids to understanding the theme of a passage in context are *prayer* and *thought*.
 - *Prayer* – ask the Holy Spirit, the Author, to help you understand what he has written.
 - *Thought* – read, read, and re-read a section. As you do so, jot down what stands out (“fireflies”).
 - chew, digest: *what’s the point? what everyday life situation illustrates/strikes it home?*
- Commentaries (especially the older works by Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Edwards) and Study Bibles may help – but they are no substitute for personal prayer and thought.