

## **Sermon Outline**

# **“Biblical Interpretation: Literary Context” – Reading the Bible For All Its Worth, Part 3 – Don DeVries – January 22, 2012**

## **Understanding the Passage: Context**

1. The first step in understanding a passage (exegesis) is to understand the context. Context is the circumstances that form the *setting* for an event, a statement or a written text by which that event, statement of text can be understood.
2. To understand a book or passage in its original setting, we must understand the historical and literary context.

## **Historical Context**

1. The historical context has to do with the history that forms the backdrop for the biblical story. Historical context includes information about the biblical writer and audience, the author’s purpose, the culture, the customs, the beliefs, and the historical events for that particular time.
  - a. “Many aspects of Scripture can be understood fairly well by just reading a passage carefully. But at the same time we need to remember that Scripture is an ancient text that has come down to us from millennia ago. With such an ancient text, we could expect to find certain words, events, concepts, and cultural features that are obscure to us. Even if we have a good translation, if we are not familiar with certain historical dynamics surrounding the text, we will miss dimensions of the Bible’s meaning at points. God gave us his Word in particular times, places, and ways; and learning about those times, places and ways helps us to read the Bible better.” – Andreas Kostenberger
2. What are the kinds of questions we can ask to better understand the historical context?
  - a. Who are the author and the recipients?
  - b. When and where did this take place?
  - c. What is the situation (political, economic, philosophical, spiritual, etc.)?
  - d. What is the author’s purpose for writing this book?
  - e. Are there any unfamiliar customs?

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### **Literary Context: Literary Genres**

1. When the Biblical writers wanted to communicate the truths of God's revelation, God's dealings with His people and His redemptive plan, they carefully chose words and literary forms that best conveyed their message. Thus, the human authors of 66 books, superintended by the work of the Holy Spirit, communicated the truth of God's Word in various types of literature called literary genres. Following are the major types of literary genres in Scripture:
  - a. Narratives (also referred to as "Historical Narratives") – Narratives, which comprise over 50% of the Bible, are stories primarily found from Genesis to Esther and Acts.
  - b. Law – The Mosaic Law is primarily found in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, though it is referenced throughout the prophets and the New Testament.
  - c. Poetry – Poetry is pervasive in the Old Testament, missing from only in 5 of the 39 books. The primary poetic books are Job, Psalms, Lamentations, and many of the Prophets.
  - d. Wisdom Sayings – The wisdom literature includes Job, some of the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.
  - e. Prophecy – Major Prophets: Isaiah to Daniel; Minor Prophets: Hosea to Malachi. The prophet's main purpose was to enforce the covenant that God made with Israel and to call God's people back to obedience to the Law.
  - f. Gospels – A gospel is the "good news" of the saving work of Christ found in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Although similar to narratives, the subject matter of the Gospels put them in their own separate literary genre.
  - g. Parables – Parables are short, fictitious stories drawn from real life that are used to illustrate a point. They are found mostly in the Gospels.
  - h. Letters/Epistles – Paul, James, John, Peter and Jude wrote New Testament Letters from Romans to Jude. Written to churches and individuals, these letters often addressed problems within or affecting a church or a group of churches.
  - i. Apocalyptic – Apocalyptic literature is the disclosing of unseen heavenly or future realities. Apocalyptic literature is found primarily in Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation.
2. Examples of interpretive principles for three literary genres:

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- a. *Interpreting Narratives*: when reading stories or narratives, we must place the meaning of one particular story in light of the overall meaning of the book or the surrounding verses and stories.
  - b. *Interpreting Proverbs*: When reading the Proverbs, we must keep in mind that Proverbs are crystalized truth that are generally true in most situations in life but are not true in all situations. Proverbs must be interpreted in harmony with other Biblical truth, including other proverbs.
  - c. *Interpreting New Testament Letters*: To understand New Testament letters, we must understand that the letter writers in the New Testament were engaged in a long-distance conversation. The letters we possess in the Bible are one side of that conversation. We must surmise from what the author wrote what the other side was saying, practicing or believing.
3. Book Recommendation: *40 Questions About Interpreting The Bible*, by Robert Plummer. This book includes 15 chapters with principles of interpretation for different types of literary genres.

## Literary Context: Scripture as Literature

1. Like other literature, Scripture has cohesive units of thought. Words make up sentences, which form paragraphs; paragraphs are collected into chapters and chapters into books. And like other literature, the writer composed his work in an intentional way. Part of rightly understanding a passage or book is uncovering how the author composed a passage or book in a logical and cohesive way.
2. For example: Luke intentionally composed Acts as a work of literature.
  - a. The programmatic verse is Acts 1:8 "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Five different times Luke provides the reader with periodic summaries (progress reports) to tell us how Acts 1:8 is unfolding.
    - 1). (Gospel in Jerusalem) Acts 6:7 "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples *continued to increase* greatly in Jerusalem..."
    - 2). (Gospel spread to Judea and Samaria) Acts 9:31 "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up ... *it continued to increase*."
    - 3). (Gospel began spreading to Gentiles) Acts 12:24 "But the word of the Lord *continued to grow and to be multiplied*."

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- 4). (Gospel spread to Asia and Europe) Acts 16:5 “So the churches were ... *increasing in number daily.*”
  - 5). (Gospel spread to known world) Acts 19:20 “So the word of the Lord was *growing mightily and prevailing.*”
3. Another example of intentional literary composition comes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Near the beginning of chapter 5 are the Beatitudes. It is easy to read each Beatitude as independent verses. But Matthew wanted these understood together. In the Beatitudes, Matthew uses a literary device called a “literary inclusio” or literary bookends.
- a. Verses 3 and 10 end with the same phrase, “*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” This literary technique means that everything bracketed between the two bookends is a logical unit and share a common theme. In particular, the theme that all the Beatitudes share is these qualities are the normal characteristics or normal marks of a disciple in God’s kingdom that God blesses.
  - b. Matthew uses this and other literary techniques in the Sermon on the Mount: 5:17 and 7:12 (inclusio – “law and the prophets”); 5:21 – 5:48 (“you have heard that it was said”); 6:1 – 6:17 (“your Father who sees in secret will reward you”); 7:13 – 7:27 (two ways; two trees; two disciples; two foundations)

## Literary Context

1. What is the literary context? “The literary context includes the words, sentences, and paragraphs preceding and following a passage. The literary context locates a passage within the larger purposes of a book.” – Daniel Doriani
2. What kind of questions can help us understand literary context?
  - a. How does this verse fit into the verses around it?
  - b. How does this passage fit into the nearby paragraphs or chapters?
  - c. How do these paragraphs and chapters fit into the book?
3. Example: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. These verses list the biblical qualities and characteristics of love.
4. How do these verses fit into the verses around it?

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- a. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 – In these verses, Paul is contrasting love with spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are not unimportant, but if they are not exercised in and with love, then they are offensive and utterly worthless. Love is absolutely indispensable and transcends even the greatest exercise of gifts.
  - b. 1 Corinthians 13:7-13 – Paul again contrasts spiritual gifts to love. But this time, the contrast turns on the fact that love has eternal permanence and spiritual gifts are temporary.
5. How does this passage fit into the nearby paragraphs or chapters?
- a. The last sentence in 1 Corinthians 12:31 connects chapter 12 to chapter 13, “And I will show you a still more excellent way.”
  - b. 1 Corinthians 14:1 states, “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts....” Here again, chapter 13 connects with chapter 14 as Paul returns to the discussion about gifts, particular tongues and prophecy.
  - c. Chapter 13 is not isolated. It is part of a logical unit of thought in Paul’s discussion about spiritual gifts. In chapters 12 and 14, Paul sought to correct pride, factions, condescension, self-pity and the misuse of spiritual gifts. In chapter 13, Paul heightens his correction by teaching them the more excellent way of love. Love should permeate and undergird their use of gifts and love should define how they regard and treat one another.
6. How do these paragraphs and chapters fit into the book?
- a. In 1 Corinthians chapters 7-16, Paul answered a series of questions put to him in a written letter from the Corinthians. One of the literary signposts that Paul uses to let his Corinthian reader’s know that he is answering their questions is the phrase, “*Now concerning...*”
  - b. So in 1 Corinthians 12:1, Paul tackles the 4<sup>th</sup> issue raised by the Corinthian letter. He writes: “*Now concerning spiritual gifts...*”
7. Summary: Literary context seeks to understand a passage by locating it in the larger context of surrounding verses, paragraphs, chapters and the book as a whole.

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### **Tools to Help Understand Historical and Literary Contexts:**

1. Read – If possible, read the entire book in one sitting to get an overall sense of the book’s message and flow. Remembering details is not as important in this reading. Read the book again observing information about the historical and literary contexts.
2. Study Bible – in a good study Bible, the introductions and the footnotes to each book will address the historical and literary context.
3. Bible Dictionary or Bible Commentaries – good ones will provide historical background and comments about the literary structure.