

INTRODUCTION

"I want to improve my ability to study Scripture, but where do I begin? And how do I move forward from there?" Those are crucial questions. With the nature of Scripture firmly fixed in one's mind (see Lessons 1–9 in this series), with the personal perquisites for the study of Scripture identified (see Lesson 10), and with the principles needed for interpretation defined (see Lessons 11–12), it is now time to put all of this into practice.

In the next four lessons, our attention will be turned to this *practice of Bible study*. We will examine four distinct but successive stages that characterize the careful, disciplined study of the Word of God. These stages are as follows:

Stage I. Orientation – *Surveying the text's surroundings.*

Stage II. Observation – *Examining the text's contents.*

Stage III. Interpretation – *Understanding the text's meaning.*

Stage IV. Application – *Obedying the text's message.*

The first stage of this process focuses on orienting the student to the world *around* the text. He must take time to survey this landscape before he jumps into any effort to make conclusions about what the text means. The second stage focuses on acquainting the student with the contents *in* the text. Before he can interpret anything, he must first become acquainted with what the text actually says. The third stage of the process focuses on drawing the meaning *from* the text. The student cannot be content with mere acquaintance with details. He must make sense out of them. He must lead out of the text the divine-human intent for its contents. The fourth and final stage focuses on submitting *to* the text. It is in this final stage of obedience to the text's message where the student most practically displays the binding authority of Scripture.

STAGE 1: ORIENTATION

Thus, we begin with **orientation**—with **surveying the text's surroundings**. Before we begin trying to discern what the text means, we must first consider where the text is located. We call this location the text's **context**.

Location!
Location!
Location!

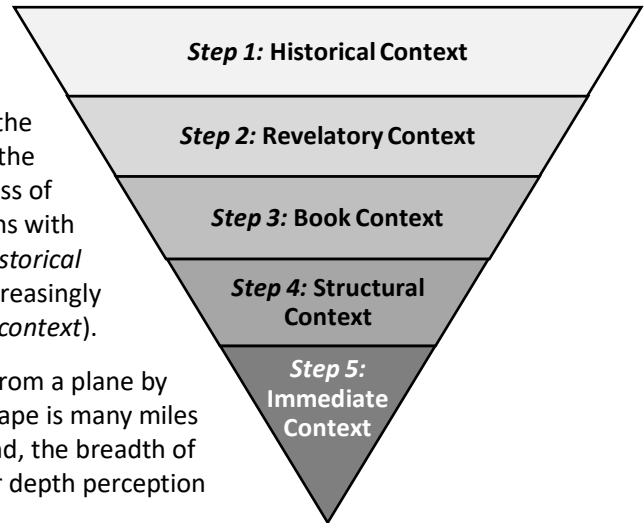
"Context" refers to *the world into which a text is woven* (in Latin, *con* means "together with," and *textus* means "woven"). The texts of Scripture were not given to us in isolation but intricately woven together into the world around them. This world is two-dimensional—it includes: (a) an *historical context* (real people, real events, real needs), and (b) a *literary context* (God's expanding collection of special revelation).

A text never fares well without its original context. We know that to be true even about our own communication. Whenever our words are "taken out of context," we feel betrayed. We insist that we have been misunderstood or mischaracterized. We often go to great lengths to set the record straight. The same is true with the words of Scripture. As one writer stated, **"a biblical text without a context inevitably becomes a pretext"**—a ploy used by a reader to communicate his own agenda using the language of the text to justify his opinion. This happens frequently. Satan himself did just this in his temptation of Jesus (see Matthew 4:6). In fact, as Howard Hendricks noted, "Every basic cult is built on ignoring the context."

Even as genuine believers, we can ignore context easily even while sincerely attempting to study Scripture. As Roy Zuck has acknowledged, "Disregarding the context is one of the greatest problems in Bible interpretation." We want to get the meaning from the text of God's Word as quickly as possible. After all, we need it! The trouble is, we're often not patient enough in the process. We jump quickly to making conclusions, without taking the necessary time to situate ourselves at the feet of the biblical writer and to survey the world within which he was writing.

Therefore, the purpose of this first stage, *orientation*, is to help the reader avoid impetuous interpretation and guide him through a process that acquaints him with the text's landscape and prepares him well for the stage that follows—*observation*. This process of orientation—consisting of five steps—begins with the broadest of the elements of context (*historical context*) and then continues on through increasingly more specific elements of context (*literary context*).

This process can be likened to descending from a plane by parachute. Initially, your view of the landscape is many miles wide but very superficial. Yet as you descend, the breadth of your peripheral vision decreases while your depth perception increases. The same is true of this process.



STEP 1:
Historical
Context

1. Survey the text's historical context.

PRINCIPLE: Good orientation begins by acquainting oneself with the historical world of the writer and his original audience.

From its beginning, Scripture was *situational* in nature—each of its books was written in response to an historical *need*. As a demonstration of God's considerateness, each of its texts were *situated* within our world. Yes, it is living and active (Hebrew 4:12). It is settled forever in heaven (Psalm 119:89). But it was first breathed out in a particular historical context. If we are to resist reading our own world into the text, we must begin with the text's original world.

This world involves five areas of consideration:

- Authorship – *Who wrote the book?*
- Date – *When did he write?*
- Location – *From where did he write?*
- Recipient(s) – *To whom did he write?*
- Circumstance – *What motivated him to write?*

The search for this information begins most importantly in the biblical book itself. The student should begin by reading through the book in which his text is found, paying special attention to the historical details it provides. But it also includes utilizing other biblical resources that are dedicated to answering these very questions. For example, the "introduction" section of a Study Bible typically provides concise answers to each of these questions. The "introduction" sections of good commentaries provide longer, more detailed answers. One also finds help in Bible study tools called "Bible Surveys" (for beginners) and "Bible Introductions" (for advanced students).

STEP 2:
Revelatory
Context

2. Determine the text's revelatory context.

PRINCIPLE: Good orientation seeks to identify when the text was written in the timeline of God's special revelation.

Having surveyed the landscape of historical context (Step 1), the focus now turns to *literary context*—that is, the literary context of the Bible itself. The important question to ask in this second step is, *Where does my text—specifically, the book in which my text is found—fall on the timeline of Scripture's composition?*

Of course, we are not expecting a specific timestamp. Instead, by seeking a general answer to this question, we are showing appreciation for the doctrine of *progressive* or *accumulating* revelation. To place the text on the timeline of God's special revelation is at the same time to identify which

revelation preceded the composition of the text I am studying. This “antecedent revelation” most likely has a significant role to play in the understanding of the text. The writer may be assuming connections to that previous revelation, and to ignore it will result in a misunderstanding of his text.

For example, if you were studying a text in 1 John, you would learn through this study of revelatory context that the letter’s composition occurred somewhere around AD 90. With that being the case, your next question would be to consider what inspired Scripture preceded that date. You would then note that the Gospel of John was written prior to 1 John—at some point earlier in the AD 80s. Aware of this sequence, you would then recognize that 1 John must be read in the light of the Gospel of John—especially because the same biblical writer authored both works. To read 1 John in ignorance of the Gospel of John would put you at a distinct disadvantage for interpretation.

Where do you look for an answer to this question? Once again, the “introductions” to Study Bibles and good commentaries, or the appropriate section in a Bible Survey or Bible Introduction, provide much-needed help.

STEP 3: 3. Establish the text’s book context.

**Book
Context**

PRINCIPLE: Good orientation seeks a sound understanding of the central argument that the writer makes in the book in which the text is found.

Now the survey of the landscape narrows even further. Now the breadth of your focus is not on the entire timeline of sacred Scripture (Step 2), but on the boundaries of the book in which your text is found. In particular, the question to answer is, *Why did the writer write this book?*

The central argument of a book can be likened to a *scarlet thread*—it is the main idea that connects a piece of literature from beginning to end. Or to use a different analogy, the central argument of a book is like a foundation to a house. It is the component that holds everything else in the structure together. James Gray explains it this way, “Many of the books of the Bible have a single thread running through the whole; a pivotal idea around which all the subsidiary ones revolve, and to catch this thread, to seize upon this idea, is absolutely necessary to unravel or break up the whole in its essential parts” (*How to Master the English Bible*, 34).

Once this “single thread” has been identified, an important guardrail for interpreting the book’s individual contents has been established. So how do you identify it? Read the book through several times, each time in one sitting, so that you can capture the book from start to finish in your mind’s eye. Then, look for that special theme, that dominant topic, the repeated idea that holds the book together. When you think you’ve found it, consult once again the “introduction” sections in a Study Bible or good commentary, looking for what those resources state about the *purpose* of the book.

Ultimately, the goal is to be able to state—in your own words—the book’s purpose in a simple statement: “The purpose of this book is to . . .”

STEP 4: 4. Discern the text’s structural context.

**Structural
Context**

PRINCIPLE: Good orientation requires an eye for the literary structure of the book in which the text is found.

Once again, the survey of the landscape narrows even further. Now the student looks beyond the book’s overall purpose—the scarlet thread (Step 3)—to discern the literary structure or skeleton of the book. The important question to be answered here is, *What are the main parts of this writer’s work?*

The student’s task now is to construct a basic outline of the book in which his text is found. This outline reflects the major transitions that happen in the writer’s flow of thought, as he moves from one emphasis to another. This outline becomes especially helpful later in the process of study, when the student begins to wrestle through the text’s actual meaning. When he is faced with various interpretive options, the ability to recall the outline of the book and the emphasis of each major

section provides much needed assistance. The interpretive option that best aligns with the emphasis of the section will most often prove to be the correct one.

Where is help found for constructing a book outline? Once again, reading through the book is essential. As you read, look for major transitions in topics, characters, locations, or emphases. Beyond that, every good Study Bible will contain an outline of the book in its “introduction,” as will good commentaries and Bible Surveys and Introductions.

STEP 5:
Immediate
Context

5. Identify the text’s immediate context.

PRINCIPLE: Good orientation requires an attentiveness to the paragraphs before and after the text that is to be studied.

Now we have reached the final step in the process of orientation. We are now at the threshold of the text. It is time to give attention to the paragraphs that precede and follow the text we are studying.

A “**paragraph**” is “a subdivision of a written composition that consists of one or more sentences, deals with one point or gives the words of one speaker, and begins on a new usually indented line” (Merriam-Webster). A paragraph is a *complete unit of thought*.

Thus, the question now to answer is, *What is the paragraph that precedes the text, what is the paragraph that follows, and what are their big ideas?* Explaining the importance of these paragraphs, Bernard Ramm states, “The material before the passage is the radar which guides the approach, and the following material is the radar of the leaving. And if we can track the material approaching and leaving the particular passage, we have the framework in which the passage is to be understood” (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 139).

These surrounding paragraphs comprise the writer’s own effort to point his reader’s understanding in the right direction. These paragraphs are the most important aspects of context—the most critical guardrails to keep interpretation from veering off into the ditch. Once they have been appropriately surveyed, the reader is then ready to enter the next stage—the stage of *observation*.

DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions in your small group:

1. What are the four general *stages* of Bible Study? Summarize each one in a sentence or phrase.
2. Explain in your own words the five essential steps of this first stage of *orientation*.
3. What happens to a text when it is read apart from its context? Provide an example that you have heard of someone taking a passage of Scripture out of its original context to advance an error.
4. When was the last time you read the introduction section to a book of the Bible in your Study Bible? Do you reference these sections in your regular reading of Scripture?
5. Read through the introduction section to Romans in the MacArthur Study Bible. How does that introduction help you understand some or all of the five steps listed above?

FURTHER
STUDY

For further study this week:

1. Listen to the sermon by John MacArthur, entitled “What It Takes to Study God’s Word” (*Grace to You*), preached June 8, 1997, available here: [What It Takes to Study God's Word](#).

RECOMMENDED
READING

The following books are recommended for students of Scripture who are at a beginner-intermediate level in their study of Scripture:

- Hendricks, Howard, and William Hendricks. *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible*. Moody Publishers, 2007.
- Mayhue, Richard. *How to Study the Bible*. Christian Focus, 2006.
- Vlach, Michael. *Dispensational Hermeneutics: Interpretation Principles that Guide Dispensationalism’s Understanding of the Bible’s Storyline*. Theological Studies Press, 2023.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: www.gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: April 9, “The Practice of Bible Study, Part 2” (Brad Klassen)