

# HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

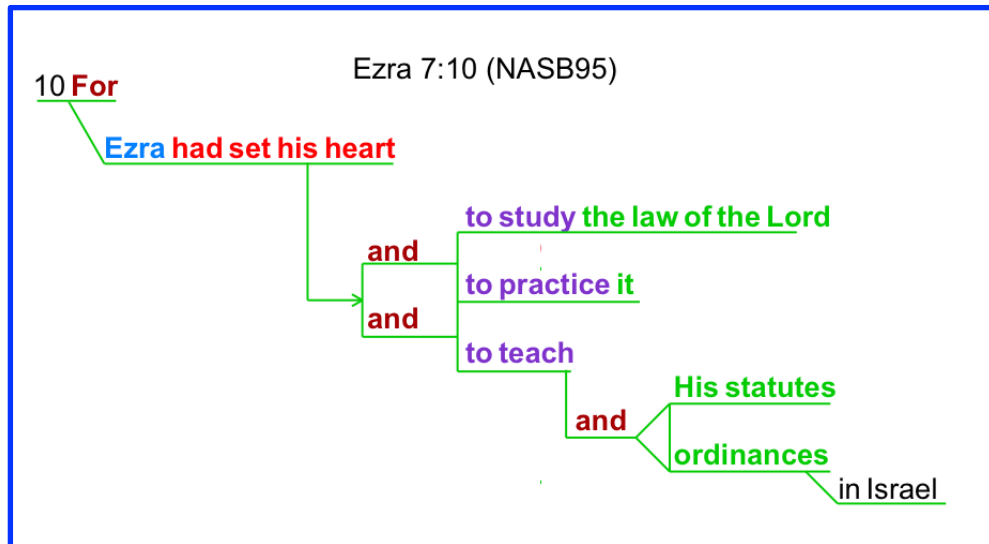
## Context is King!

### Lesson #2

One of the skills every Bible student needs to acquire is the ability to discern what part of a text is the main part and what part isn't. When you read a verse you need to learn how to find the main thing being talked about and what parts of the text are talking about that main thing. So every lesson from here on out we will have what I am calling a "Teacher's Tip." Every week in the "Teacher's Tip" we will examine a single text of Scripture related to Bible study in order to discover the main point and its sub points.

*David valued the Word more than gold. What would the martyrs have given for a leaf of the Bible! The Word is the field where Christ the pearl of price is hid. In this sacred mine we dig, not for a wedge of gold, but for a weight of glory. The Scripture is a sacred eye-salve to illuminate us. "The commandment is a lamp, and the law is light" (Prov. 6:23). The Scripture is the chart and compass by which we sail to the new Jerusalem. It is a sovereign cordial in all distresses. What are the promises but the water of life to renew fainting spirits?<sup>1</sup>*

**Ezra 7:10:** "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel."



### “HOW YOU CAN BE BLESSED BY GOD TOO!”

- I. SET YOUR HEART TO STUDY GOD’S WORD
- II. SET YOUR HEART TO PRACTICE GOD’S WORD
- III. SET YOUR HEART TO TEACH GOD’S WORD

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pgs. 35-36.

In the first lesson we discussed the importance of determining the **literary type** or **genre** of any given passage we are studying. We also talked about the **historical context and setting** of the book i.e., the historical, social, and political times in which the book was written. We saw that discovering the **theme** of a book is also a valuable tool in helping us arrive at the right interpretation. We noted that the individual parts of a book are building blocks of the theme. We also talked about looking at an **outline of the book**. Outlines help you see how the book is structured and how your passage fits into that structure. In this lesson we will learn the crucial principles of **far and near context**.

## I. THE IMPORTANCE OF "CONTEXT"

A. **Far Context** is similar to the theme of a book, but narrows down the field of study a little more. By "**context**" we mean mostly what comes before but also to a degree what comes after a passage. The far context tells you:

1. How your passage fits into the overall theme of the book
2. How your passage fits into a larger section which fits into the theme
3. It may help you understand your passage by showing you what leads up to it or what comes after it
4. It may give you clues to how your passage might be interpreted more accurately

## B. Examples:

1. The theme of **Genesis 12-50** is "Beginnings" and the sovereignty of God in the making of the nation Israel. God's sovereignty can be seen in the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. The story of Joseph is found in **chapters 37-50**.
2. If you were studying, let's say **chapter 42**, your far context would be **chapters 37-50**. It would be very helpful to examine the entire section on Joseph before studying a smaller section within the Joseph section.
3. If you were studying **Eph. 5:18** your far context would be **chapters 4-6**, which all deal with the believer's walk. You would then be able to see how the Spirit filled life in **5:18** relates to the far context of the believer's walk found in **chs. 4-6**.

## II. NEAR CONTEXT

Near context is similar to far context but only those verses in the direct vicinity of the passage you're studying are considered. Near context is **CRUCIAL** to interpreting **ANY** passage correctly!!! If you were to rate all the Bible study principles from most important to least important, near context would be at the top as the most important hermeneutical (Bible study) principle. **IT IS THE KING OF ALL BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLES.** It is to be given the most weight in interpreting any text.

### A. Examples:

1. The Mormons will try and tell you that Joseph Smith saw God the Father and Jesus in the forest. For a proof text they would refer you to **Ex. 33:11** which says, "**Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend.**" That verse seems to clearly say that Moses saw God and spoke to him. But upon closer examination of the context you discover something quite different.
  - a. First you notice the phrase "**just as**" and realize that this is a simile that is a comparison of something similar.
  - b. Second, you notice that the text doesn't say anything about "seeing" but the emphasis is on "speaking." The text never says "Moses saw God face to face" but that He "used to speak to Moses face to face. . ." emphasis being on God's talking to Moses. It was "just as" someone speaks, but not exactly.
  - c. Third you notice the near context of **verse 20** of the **same chapter** where God says, "**You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live.**" You conclude from this that Moses "spoke to God as a man speaks to his friend," but Moses did not "see God as a man sees his friend" because no man can see God and live. So it is clear that **verse 11** is talking about direct conversation between God and Moses not a visual face to face appearance of God.
2. We have all heard the songs which talk about that "*if two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name He is in their midst.*" This saying is taken from **Mt. 18:20**. Most teach that if Christians gather together in Jesus name His special presence is there with them. However, upon closer examination of **Mt. 18:20** you discover something quite different. You discover that Jesus is talking about church discipline and how to deal with an unrepentant sinning brother. What Jesus is saying is when it is necessary to enact the final step of church discipline, Christ will be there in their midst to back up their decision, for it is His will that unrepentant professing believers be removed from His Church. Since Jesus is God and everywhere present and since He dwells in us, and we in Him, He is always in our midst – even if there is just one!

### III. TESTING YOUR PREVIOUS COMMITMENT TO CONTEXT

Almost everyone who has been a Christian for any length of time has been encouraged, exhorted, or admonished to observe the context when studying the Bible. When dealing with the cults you have to become a champion of context in order to defend the truth. Below are list of **ten well known verses**. See which ones you know the context of.

- A. **John 3:16** "*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.*" Who is speaking to whom? What is being discussed? When is this happening?
- B. **Eph. 2:8-9** "*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.*" Who is the author? What has he just said in the previous 7 verses? What does vs. 10 say?
- C. **Psa. 118:24** "*This is the day which the Lord has made; Let us rejoice and be glad in it.*" Who is speaking? What is he speaking about?
- D. **Prov. 23:7** "*For as he thinks within himself, so he is.*" Who is speaking about what situation?
- E. **Matt. 22:14** "*For many are called, but few are chosen.*" Who is speaking to whom about what? How does this verse fit with the preceding context?
- F. **II Chron. 7:14** "*[if] and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*" Who is speaking to whom, about what, and when?
- G. **Psa. 37:4** "*Delight yourself in the Lord; And He will give you the desires of your heart.*" What is the near context both before and after this text talking about?
- H. **Mt. 7:1** "*Do not judge so that you will not be judged.*" Who is speaking? What is He speaking about? Is this a universal command never to judge?
- I. **Rom. 8:28** "*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.*" What is the preceding context of Rom. 8 talking about? What is the following context of Rom. 8 talking about? What does Rom. 9 talk about?
- J. **II Pet. 3:8** "*But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.*" What is the near context both before and after talking about?
  1. Eight to ten right – You are a King of Context
  2. Five to seven right – You are a Knight of Context
  3. Two to four right – You are a Novice of Context
  4. Zero to one right – You need to apply for citizenship in the country of Context

## Context of Philippians 4:13 Officially Banned, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016

learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

14 Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. 15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. 16 Even in Thessalonica you sent me help

ATLANTA, GA—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.

“At best, we can say it has something to do with the other things the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 4,” born-again Christian Richard McPhee told reporters. “Exactly what those things are, I don’t really know; I’m not a scholar. I’m just a man with a Bible, trying to do what it tells me. Don’t put this on me.”

“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!”

“You have to break it down and examine each word,” explained Tina Carrera, who leads a weekly Bible study at her home. “‘All’ means ‘any’ . . . or . . . ‘whatever,’ and ‘things’ refers to ‘stuff,’ or ‘other things’ . . . ‘things that may be on your heart.’ So I think the meaning is pretty clear. I have no further comment.”

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?”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Babylon Bee, <http://babylonbee.com/news/context-of-philippians-413-officially-abandoned/> A Christian Satirical website that seeks to use humor and satire to make a difference.

#### IV. **HOMEWORK**

The purpose of this homework is to apply what was learned in both lesson one and lesson two. **First**, read the Appendix at the end of this lesson, “The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz.” **Second**, answer the questions under point “A” concerning the genre, theme, historical context, setting, and outline. **Third**, you will be asked to meditate on and make observations of **II Tim. 2:15** as directed.

##### A. **Look at II Timothy 2:15:**

1. What kind of book is it?
2. What is the theme?
3. What was the historical context and setting?
  
4. What are the major outline points of the book of **II Timothy**?

#### V. **OBSERVATIONS OF II TIMOTHY 2:15**

- A. Using only your Bible and no other resources, write down **15 things** you can observe from **II Tim. 2:15** and its near context.
- B. “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a work man who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.”
- C. Write down **15 observations** from what **II Tim. 2:15** and its near context says.
  - 1.
  - 2.
  - 3.
  - 4.

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D. Write down **5 key observations** of what **II Tim. 2:15** does not say.

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4.

5.

E. Write down **10 key questions** which might be asked of the text, which if answered would help you understand the text better. (I.e. Questions that might relate to Paul's motives, words and their meaning, what we see in the text about God, what we see in the text about our relationship to God, etc.)

1.

2.

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10.

## VI. Conclusion:

- A. After working through this lesson, what are some of the lessons you learned which will help you in future Bible study?
  
- B. Read the entry below by Charles Spurgeon and examine and consider how you can apply what he says.

**“Search the Scriptures” (John 5:39).** The Greek word here rendered search signifies a strict, close, diligent, curious search, such as men make when they are seeking gold, or hunters when they are in earnest after game. We must not rest content with having given a superficial reading to a chapter or two, but with the candle of the Spirit we must deliberately seek out the hidden meaning of the word. Holy Scripture requires searching—much of it can only be learned by careful study. There is milk for babes, but also meat for strong men. The rabbis wisely say that a mountain of matter hangs upon every word, yea, upon every title of Scripture. Tertullian exclaims, “I adore the fullness of the Scriptures.” No man who merely skims the book of God can profit thereby; we must dig and mine until we obtain the hid treasure. The door of the word only opens to the key of diligence. The Scriptures claim searching. They are the writings of God, bearing the divine stamp and imprimatur— who shall dare to treat them with levity? He who despises them despises the God who wrote them. God forbid that any of us should leave our Bibles to become swift witnesses against us in the great day of account. The word of God will repay searching. God does not bid us sift a mountain of chaff with here and there a grain of wheat in it, but the Bible is winnowed corn—we have but to open the granary door and find it. Scripture grows upon the student. It is full of surprises. Under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, to the searching eye it glows with splendor of revelation, like a vast temple paved with wrought gold, and roofed with rubies, emeralds, and all manner of gems. No merchandise like the merchandise of Scripture truth. Lastly, the Scriptures reveal Jesus: “They are they which testify of me.” No more powerful motive can be urged upon Bible readers than this: he who finds Jesus finds life, heaven, all things. Happy is he who, searching his Bible, discovers his Savior.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, Evening, June 9<sup>th</sup>, Logos Bible Software.



## APPENDIX

### “The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz”

#### The Importance of Observation in Bible Study<sup>4</sup>

Observation should be careful. Traina relates the following story to illustrate the importance of exactness in observation:

Sir William Osler, the eminent physician, always sought to impress upon young medical students the importance of observing details. While stressing this point in a lecture before a student group he indicated a bottle on his desk. “This bottle contains a sample for analysis,” he announced. “It’s possible by testing it to determine the disease from which the patient suffers.” Suiting actions to words, he dipped a finger into the fluid and then into his mouth. “Now,” he continued, “I am going to pass this bottle around. Each of you taste the contents as I did and see if you can diagnose the case.” As the bottle was passed from row to row, each student gingerly poked his finger in and bravely sampled the contents. Osler then retrieved the bottle. “Gentlemen,” he said, “Now you will understand what I mean when I speak about details. Had you been observant you would have seen that I put my index finger into the bottle but my middle finger into my mouth.”

Observation also needs to be systematic. Martin Luther likened his Bible study to gathering apples: “First I shake the whole tree, that the ripest may fall. Then I climb the tree and shake each limb, and then each branch and then each twig, and then I look under each leaf.”

Observation must also be persistent. To repeat, extended time in observation is a must for an expositor. He must resist the temptation to plunge immediately into commentaries and other study helps. Nothing can replace firsthand observation. At the risk of seeming to violate my own guideline of keeping illustrations short, I offer the following lengthy story about the great nineteenth-century scientist Louis Agassiz and how he taught one of his students an unforgettable lesson about the importance of observation. The principles it teaches can be applied to our Bible study.

#### **The Student, the Fish, and Agassiz By the Student**

It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the scientific school as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming, my antecedents generally, the mode in which I afterwards proposed to use the knowledge I might acquire, and finally, whether I wished to study any special branch. To the latter I replied that while I wished to be well grounded in all departments of zoology, I purposed to devote myself specially to insects.

“When do you wish to begin?” he asked.

“Now,” I replied.

This seemed to please him, and with an energetic “Very well,” he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol.

“Take this fish,” said he, “and look at it; we call it a Haemulon [pronounced Hem-yuṃ lon]; by and by I will ask what you have seen.”

With that he left me, but in a moment returned with explicit instructions as to the care of the object entrusted to me.

“No man is fit to be a naturalist,” said he, “who does not know how to take care of specimens.”

I was to keep the fish before me in a tin tray, and occasionally moisten the surface with alcohol from the jar, always taking care to replace the stopper tightly.

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<sup>4</sup>Taken from John MacArthur’s book, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, Pages 211-215.

Those were not the days of ground glass stoppers, and elegantly shaped exhibition jars; all the old students will recall the huge, neckless glass bottles with their leaky, wax-besmeared corks half eaten by insects and begrimed with cellar dust. Entomology was a cleaner science than ichthyology, but the example of the professor, who had unhesitatingly plunged to the bottom of the jar to produce the fish, was infectious; and though this alcohol had “a very ancient and fishlike smell,” I really dared not show any aversion within these sacred precincts, and treated the alcohol as though it were pure water. Still I was conscious of a passing feeling of disappointment, for gazing at a fish did not commend itself to an ardent entomologist. My friends at home, too, were annoyed, when they discovered that no amount of eau de cologne would drown the perfume which haunted me like a shadow.

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the professor, who had, however, left the museum; and when I returned, after lingering over some of the odd animals stored in the upper apartment, my specimen was dry all over. I dashed the fluid over the fish as if to resuscitate it from a fainting-fit, and looked with anxiety for a return of the normal, sloppy appearance. This little excitement over, nothing was to be done but return to a steadfast gaze at my mute companion. Half an hour passed, an hour, another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face—ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters’ view—just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so, with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the museum, but had gone and would not return for several hours. My fellow students were too busy to be disturbed by continued conversation. Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish; it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my finger down its throat to feel how sharp its teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me—I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

“That is right,” said he; “a pencil is one of the best of eyes. I am glad to notice, too, that you keep your specimen wet and your bottle corked.”

With these encouraging words he added,— “Well, what is it like?”

He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me: the fringed gill—arches and movable operculum; the pores of the head, fleshy lips, and lidless eyes; the lateral line, the spinous fin, and forked tail; the compressed and arched body. When I had finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment,—

“You have not looked very carefully; why,” he continued, more earnestly, “you haven’t seen one of the most conspicuous features of the animal, which is as plainly before your eyes as the fish itself; look again, look again!” and he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the professor’s criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and when, towards its close, the professor inquired,— “Do you see it yet?”

“No,” I replied, “I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before.”

“That is next best,” he said earnestly, “but I won’t hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish.”

This was disconcerting; not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be; but also, without reviewing my new discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities. The cordial greeting from the professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

“Do you perhaps mean,” I asked, “that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?”

His thoroughly pleased, "Of course, of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically—as he always did—upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

"Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned and heard my new catalogue.

"That is good; that is good!" he repeated, "but that is not all; go on." And so, for three long days, he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. "Look, look, look," was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had—a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the professor has left to me, as he has left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

A year afterward, some of us were amusing ourselves with chalking outlandish beasts upon the museum black board. We drew prancing star-fishes; frogs in mortal combat; hydra-headed worms; stately crawl-fishes, standing on their tails, bearing aloft umbrellas; and grotesque fishes, with gaping mouths and staring eyes. The professor came in shortly after, and was as amused as any, at our experiments. He looked at the fishes.

"Haemulons, every one of them," he said. "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ drew them."

True; and to this day, if I attempt a fish, I can draw nothing but Haemulons.

The fourth day, a second fish of the same group was placed beside the first, and I was bidden to point out the resemblances and differences between the two; another and another followed, until the entire family lay before me, and a whole legion of jars covered the table and surrounding shelves; the odor had become a pleasant perfume; and even now, the sight of an old, six-inch, worm-eaten cork brings fragrant memories!

The whole group of Haemulons was thus brought in review; and, whether engaged upon the dissection of the internal organs, the preparation and examination of the bony framework, or the description of the various parts, Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

"Facts are stupid things," he would say, "until brought into connection with some general law."

At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.

The same kind of prolonged pondering of the Scriptures will eventually pay even longer dividends, stretching into eternity.