

# CONTEXT: PART DEUX



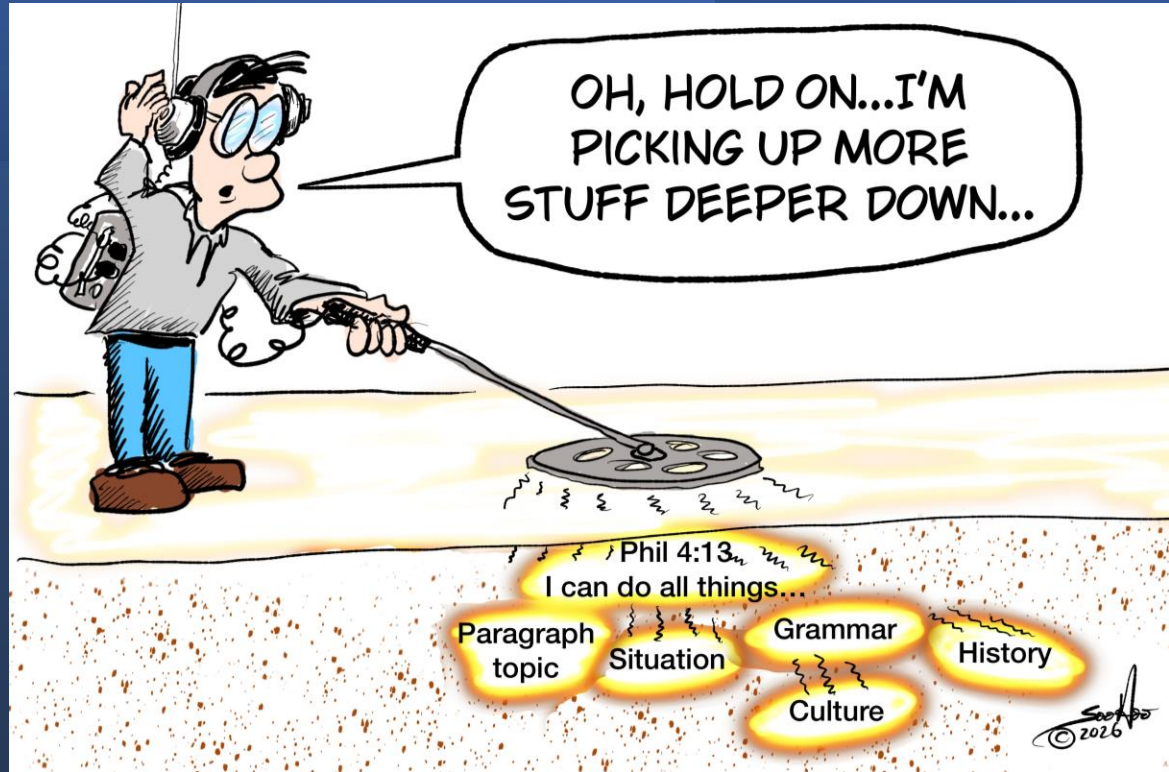


**RECALL:**  
People do Bible Study  
as though they were  
only looking at one  
puzzle piece without  
looking at the bigger  
picture.

In part 1, we recognized the importance of context

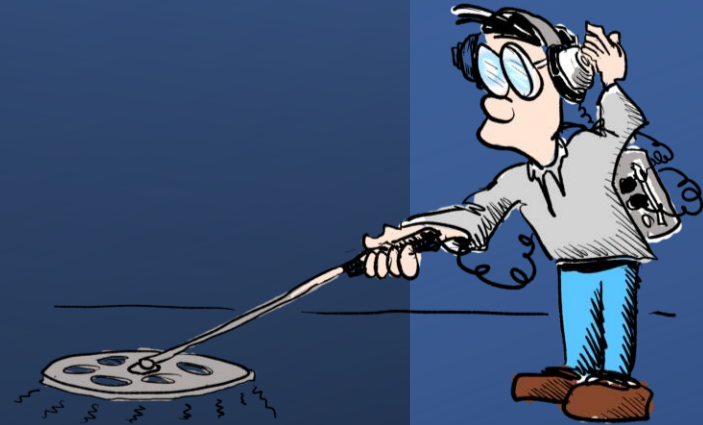
In part 2, we will practice contextual interpretation

- How to recognize when context is the key to an accurate interpretation
- Developing an intuition for interpretation



How do you know if  
**CONTEXT** is an issue?

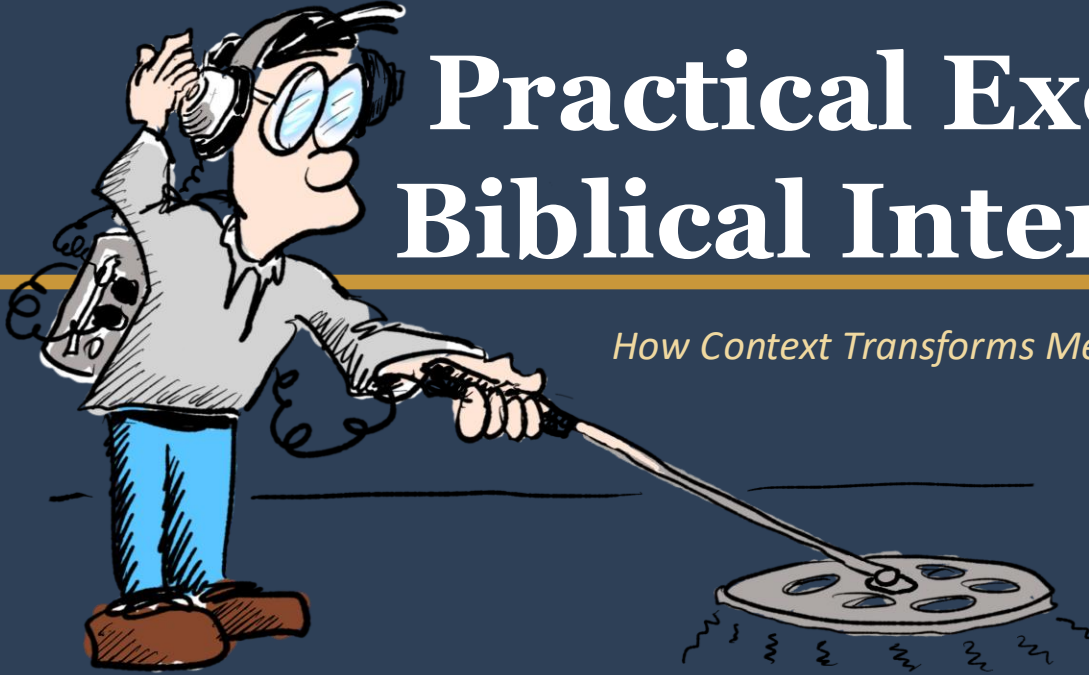
Is consideration of  
**CONTEXT** ever  
optional?



READING IN CONTEXT

# Practical Exercises in Biblical Interpretation

*How Context Transforms Meaning*



Exercise-Based Learning • 5 Biblical Case Studies • Step-by-Step Method

# The 4-Step Method

*Use this same framework for every exercise in this series*



01

## Read in Isolation

Read only the verse as given — no surrounding text. Write down your first impression of what it means.

02

## Expand the Context

Read the surrounding paragraph, chapter, and book. Note who is speaking, to whom, and why.

03

## Identify the Shift

Compare your two readings. Where and why did the meaning change? Name the exact contextual factor.

04

## State the Principle

Articulate the hermeneutical rule the exercise illustrates — one sentence you can apply to any text.

# Exercise 1 — Jeremiah 29:11

Steps 1 & 2: Isolation Reading → Expand Context

EXERCISE 1 OF 5



*"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

— Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

STEP 1 · READ IN ISOLATION

**Common first reading:**

A personal promise from God — financial blessing, healing, career success, or relational restoration. Often cited on graduation cards and motivational posts.

*Does this promise feel personal?  
Have you seen it used this way?*

STEP 2 · EXPAND THE CONTEXT

**Read: Jeremiah 29:1–14**

**Who is speaking?** God, through Jeremiah  
**To whom?** Israelites exiled to Babylon (~597 BC)

**Occasion?** A letter to a nation in captivity  
**False prophets (v. 8–9)** promised return in 2 years

**God's actual command (v. 5–7):** Settle down — build, plant, marry, pray for Babylon!

# Exercise 1 — Jeremiah 29:11

Steps 3 & 4: Identify the Shift → State the Principle



## STEP 3 · IDENTIFY THE SHIFT

### WITHOUT CONTEXT

A personal promise guaranteeing prosperity and a hopeful future — right now — for any individual believer.

### WITH CONTEXT

A communal promise to an exiled nation. God has a redemptive plan even in judgment — but it is fulfilled after 70 years (v. 10), not immediately.

**SHIFT:** Historical audience + timeline (v. 10) — the promise was never addressed to you personally or redeemable immediately.

## STEP 4 · STATE THE PRINCIPLE

*"Identifying the original recipient and historical occasion is the first step to faithful interpretation. A promise given to one person or group cannot be automatically claimed by all."*

# Exercise 2 — Philippians 4:13

Steps 1 & 2: Isolation Reading → Expand Context

EXERCISE 2 OF 5



*"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

— Philippians 4:13 (NKJV)

STEP 1 · READ IN ISOLATION

**Common first reading:**

Christ gives unlimited power to accomplish any goal — used on sports jerseys, pre-game prayers, job interviews, weight-loss motivation. "All things" = literally everything I attempt.

*Can a Christian literally fly, win every game, or get every job they apply for through Christ?*

STEP 2 · EXPAND THE CONTEXT

**Read: Philippians 4:10–13**

**Occasion:** Paul thanks church for financial support while he is in prison

**Key words (v. 11–12):** "I have LEARNED to be content" — in poverty AND abundance  
"All things" = all circumstances of need or plenty

**The strength is for:** endurance and contentment — not unlimited personal achievement

# Exercise 2 — Philippians 4:13

Steps 3 & 4: Identify the Shift → State the Principle



## STEP 3 · IDENTIFY THE SHIFT

### WITHOUT CONTEXT

"Christ gives me power to accomplish anything I attempt — no limits." The verse becomes an all-purpose success mantra.

### WITH CONTEXT

"Through Christ I can endure any circumstance — poverty or plenty — with contentment. The power is for faithfulness, not achievement."

**SHIFT:** The immediate literary context defines "all things" — contentment in any state — not a blank promise of capability.

## STEP 4 · STATE THE PRINCIPLE

*"The immediate paragraph defines the scope of a verse. Always read the surrounding sentences before landing on a meaning."*

# Exercise 3 — John 3:16

Steps 1 & 2: Isolation Reading → Expand Context

EXERCISE 3 OF 5



*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

— John 3:16 (NIV)

## STEP 1 · READ IN ISOLATION

### Common first reading:

A simple, universal invitation: God loves everyone and salvation is available to all who believe. Often read as a standalone gospel summary with no specific context needed.

*Is there anything misleading about treating this as a context-free gospel tract?*

## STEP 2 · EXPAND THE CONTEXT

### Read: John 3:1–21

**Audience:** Nicodemus — a Pharisee, Jewish ruler (v. 1), at night

**Book-level:** John uses 'kosmos' 78 times — often = humanity in rebellion against God

**Cultural:** "Only Son" echoes Abraham/Isaac (Gen. 22) — shocking to a Jewish ear

**John 1:10 context:** The world did not recognize its Creator — God's love is therefore a scandal

# Exercise 3 — John 3:16

Steps 3 & 4: Identify the Shift → State the Principle



## STEP 3 · IDENTIFY THE SHIFT

### WITHOUT CONTEXT

A generic, timeless gospel summary. The verse floats free of any situation — easy to quote, but stripped of its dramatic force.

### WITH CONTEXT

A confrontation with a religious expert at night. God's love for a hostile world — layered with OT echoes and Johannine theology — is the point. It is a claim of identity, not a pep talk.

**SHIFT:** Layering immediate conversation + book-level word usage + cultural background restores the verse's original force.

## STEP 4 · STATE THE PRINCIPLE

*"Meaning is enriched — not changed — by context. Even well-known verses carry depths that only become visible when you ask: to whom, when, and against what backdrop?"*

# Exercise 4 — Matthew 7:1

Steps 1 & 2: Isolation Reading → Expand Context

EXERCISE 4 OF 5



*"Do not judge, or you too will be judged."*

— Matthew 7:1 (NIV)

STEP 1 · READ IN ISOLATION

**Common first reading:**

Jesus forbids all moral evaluation. Invoked to silence correction: "You're judging me!" All discernment between right and wrong is prohibited for Christians.

*Did Jesus ever make moral judgments elsewhere? Can Paul's letters be reconciled with this reading?*

STEP 2 · EXPAND THE CONTEXT

**Read: Matthew 7:1–5**

**v. 3–5:** "First take the plank out of your OWN eye — THEN you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"

**Sermon context:** Jesus rebukes Pharisaic hypocrisy throughout Matt. 5–7

**Canonical check:** Matt. 18:15–17 gives a judgment process; 1 Cor. 5:12 calls Christians to judge those inside the church

# Exercise 4 — Matthew 7:1

Steps 3 & 4: Identify the Shift → State the Principle



## STEP 3 · IDENTIFY THE SHIFT

### WITHOUT CONTEXT

All judgment is forbidden. No Christian may call any behavior sinful or evaluate any moral claim. Silence correction at all times.

### WITH CONTEXT

Harsh, self-righteous condemnation is forbidden — playing God as final judge. Discernment and loving correction are not only permitted (v. 5) but required (Matt. 18, 1 Cor. 5).

**SHIFT:** The next four verses complete the command. Stopping at v. 1 removes the very instruction Jesus gives about how to judge.

## STEP 4 · STATE THE PRINCIPLE

*"Never stop at a single verse. The following verses often complete, qualify, or define the command. A partial reading can reverse the meaning entirely."*

# Exercise 5 — Romans 8:28

Steps 1 & 2: Isolation Reading → Expand Context

EXERCISE 5 OF 5



*"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*

— Romans 8:28 (NIV)

STEP 1 · READ IN ISOLATION

**Common first reading:**

A general divine guarantee that every difficulty in a believer's life will eventually produce a good outcome — healing, restoration, success, happiness.

*What does "good" mean? Good feelings? What qualifies as "those who love him"?*

STEP 2 · EXPAND THE CONTEXT

**Read: Romans 8:17–30**

**Setting:** Chapter 8 is about present suffering and future glory

**v. 17–18:** Sharing in Christ's sufferings; present suffering compared to future glory

**v. 22–23:** Creation groaning; believers groaning in hardship

**v. 29 defines "good":** "conformed to the image of his Son" — Christlikeness, not comfort

# Exercise 5 — Romans 8:28

Steps 3 & 4: Identify the Shift → State the Principle



## STEP 3 · IDENTIFY THE SHIFT

### WITHOUT CONTEXT

A blanket guarantee that everything will work out well for any believer — good feelings, healed relationships, reversed misfortune.

### WITH CONTEXT

A covenant promise to persecuted believers: God uses even suffering to conform them to Christ (v. 29). The 'good' is Christlikeness — which may come through, not despite, pain.

**SHIFT: v. 29 defines the key term. Let Scripture define its own words before importing your definition.**

## STEP 4 · STATE THE PRINCIPLE

*"Let the author define his own terms. The meaning of key words in a verse is often supplied by the surrounding verses — look for the author's own definition before importing yours."*

# The Contextual Method — Summary

*Six questions to ask every time you open the text*



## Who is speaking?

- 1 Author, character, or God — each carries different authority and purpose.

## Who is the audience?

- 2 Individual, nation, church, or universal — recipient scope changes application.

## What is the occasion?

- 3 Crisis, celebration, instruction, polemic — the situation shapes the message.

## Where does this fit in the book?

- 4 Argument flow, narrative arc, poetic structure — position affects interpretation.

## What genre am I reading?

- 5 Narrative, epistle, prophecy, wisdom, apocalyptic — genre sets interpretive rules.

## How does the rest of Scripture speak?

- 6 Canonical harmony — later revelation illuminates earlier text; check for development.

NEXT STEPS

# Practice Assignment

*Apply the 4-step method to one of these passages on your own:*



**A**

## Choose a passage

Isaiah 40:31 • Proverbs 3:5–6 • Revelation 3:20

**B**

## Apply all 4 steps

Write your Step 1 reading, then your Step 2 expanded reading, then articulate the shift and the principle in your own words.

**C**

## Share your results

Be ready to walk the class through your interpretive shift — what changed, and why?

*"The whole counsel of God." — Acts 20:27*



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