

How to Study the Bible

Lesson #4—Bridging Gaps

Going Back in Time

Let's say one day you get it in yourself to go back and study the Declaration of Independence. You have not done this since High School, but given all that's going on in America today, you want to better learn the principles on which this country was founded. But as you read through the Declaration, it's not as easy to understand as you might think. Why is that? Because there is a gap. There is a gap between the "then" and the "now" and unless that gap is bridged, you won't be able to fully understand what was meant back then.

Actually, there are several gaps. There is a time gap. Now almost 250 years separate you from the writing of the Declaration. If you don't speak English, there is a language and grammar gap. But even for English speakers, there are subtle differences in this older English. For instance, as you encounter words like "necfsary," "difsolve," and "happinefs," you realize something is different about this form of English. (In reality, these words are not substituting an "f" for an "s," but rather this "f" is actually a stretched out letter "s" used to indicate a long "s") Additionally, the Declaration in several places reads like one huge, drawn out, run on sentence. You need to carefully parse the phrases to make sense of it all.

Further, there is a context gap. The most famous line of the Declaration cannot be fully understood without grasping its context: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The context of this phrase makes clear the meaning of such concepts like "liberty."

There is a cultural gap. The Declaration references laws, judges, legislative bodies, troops, trade, taxes, and more, all of which are unique to the culture of Great Britain and colonial America. Their way of life is reflected in the document and it is certainly different from 21st century America.

Finally, especially for a document like the Declaration of Independence, there is a huge historical gap. This document cannot be rightly understood without first getting its historical background. The circumstances, purpose, and intent of the Declaration are joined at the hip with its historical setting. The historical situation can be gathered from the Declaration itself and details can be added from other historical knowledge. For instance, you can gather from the document that this collection of 13 colonies, represented by 56 men, is reacting to perceived inequalities and unfair treatment by Great Britain and its king. The people of the colonies are being abused, which violates their natural rights as human beings.

The people are free to pursue life, liberty, and happiness and they are free to choose a form of self-government which promotes these principles, not opposes them. Therefore, declaration from Great Britain is being declared. A further historical study would shed light on these abuses and provide important background. You would learn, for instance, about the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Tax (1765), and the Tea Act (1773), all of which were ways the king sought to make the colonies finance Britain's debts. Yet the colonists had no voice in Parliament and revolted against such taxation without representation. Some greater insight could also be had by looking into the background of the author of the document, primarily Thomas Jefferson. You would learn that he, and therefore the Declaration, drew on ideas from the Enlightenment, especially those of John Locke. All of this study would go a long way in helping you arrive at the original meaning of the words of the Declaration of Independence.

All of the above applies to Bible study. The task of studying the Bible likewise involves bridging several gaps so as to place yourself back in their world. The goal is to arrive at the original meaning of the text because what the text meant then is what it means now. However, you must transport yourself from the "now" to the "then" in order to understand the original author's intent.

Studying the Bible like this can be challenging though because the gaps are so much larger. The time gap is huge, almost 2,000 years for the New Testament and 3,500+ years for the Old Testament. The geographical and cultural gap is huge. Biblical events take place half way across the world and their culture is so vastly different from 21st century American culture. The language gap for most is impassible, given that the Bible was writing in Hebrew, Greek, and a little Aramaic. The grammatical gap isn't that much easier, even if you can understand the language. And the contextual gap is huge, given how large and extensive the Bible is as a whole.

But this is the next step of Bible study after initial observation—to bridge these gaps. By building bridges and crossing over into the world of Scripture, your questions of the text start getting answered and you move closer to the original meaning.

The good news is that the most difficult language gap has been bridged by faithful translators. Realistically, most people will never be able to converse in the original languages of the Bible, but that's okay, because trustworthy teams have translated the Bible into English, thereby bridging that gap. There is still work to be done, but you can now study with a faithful English translation, which captures the original text in its most ancient manuscripts.

For the purposes of this guide then, the focus will rest on three major gaps that need to be bridged—the historical gap, the grammatical gap, and the contextual gap. The historical gap involves the setting and circumstances of a given writing, as well as any culturally relevant background. The grammatical gap involves the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences taken in their normal, plain sense. The contextual gap involves the surrounding material of the text, the literary genre of the text, and the Bible as a whole. This lesson will take you through practical ways to study the Bible with the aim of bridging these three gaps.

Step #7—Bridge

Part 1—The Historical Gap

If God wanted to, He could have sent the Bible down from heaven via parachute. He could have written it apart from human authors and given His will separate from human circumstances. But He didn't. Instead, God chose to use human authors writing from unique times, places, circumstances, cultures, backgrounds, and styles to form His word. By design, the Bible reflects the culture of its day. To properly understand the Bible then, you need to clear your mind of 21st century, western culture and seek to transport yourself back to the ancient near east. To do this, you need to study the history, culture, geography, and background of the biblical writers, all of which, for the sake of simplicity, is being included in this historical gap.

To start, it's helpful to define and better understand the concept of culture itself. Culture can be defined as what a given historical people group believes, says, does, or makes. How one categorizes "people groups" can broadly range. As a very narrow example, the making of lei flower necklaces is associated with the Hawaiian culture. Saying the word "dude" might identify you as a young Californian. Believing that society is going to collapse and taking action by stockpiling food, water, and supplies in a bunker would make you a part of the doomsday prepper culture.

When it comes to the Bible though, we are interested in the history and cultures of the authors of Scripture. This makes an understanding of Jewish, Greek, and Roman history and culture critical for bridging the historical gap. You want to research and learn about the histories of these people groups, their rises and falls, their major moments, their great leaders, and so on. You also want to learn what makes them unique. How would you describe their relationships, religions, politics, agriculture, economics, warfare, language, and customs? This background, specific to a biblical writer, works its way into the text's meaning sometimes, so you need to draw it out.

Additionally, the geography of Japan is going to be irrelevant to studying the Bible. Instead, obviously, you would want to equip yourself with knowledge of the geography of the Middle East, southern Europe, and northeastern Africa. The lay of the land and the surrounding people groups is also a part of most Bible passages and must be taken into account.

Again, the purpose of bridging the historical gap by studying the history, culture, and geography of the biblical people groups is to get closer to the original meaning of the text. Ultimately, we are after the meaning of words, phrases, and practices in the biblical text, but these are shaped by the original setting of the author. Words and customs change over time and lead to great miscommunication if not overcome. So you need to take the original setting of the author into consideration if you are going to rightly divide the word.

Historical Gap Examples

To make this historical gap more practical and understandable, here is an excellent list of examples of where historical information comes into play in a text's meaning. This sampling is taken *Basic Bible Interpretation* by Roy B. Zuck (Victor Publishing, 1991).

Political

Why did Boaz go to the city gate to talk with the town elders about Naomi's land? (Ruth 4:1) The city gate was the place where legal business was conducted and court cases were heard (Deut. 21:18-21; 22:13-15; Josh. 20:4; Job 29:7).

Religious

Why did the Herodians, Sadducees, and a scribe ask the questions they asked of Jesus in Mark 12:13-28? The questions related to their separate occupations and beliefs. The Herodians were supported by Herod and the Romans, and so they debated with Jesus about paying taxes to a foreign power (v. 14). The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, and so they sought to silence their opponent by a hypothetical question about a woman who had seven husbands (v. 23). The Jewish scribes were concerned about Old Testament commandments and so one of them asked Him which commandment was the most important (v. 28).

Agricultural

Why did Amos call the women of Bethel "cows of Bashan" in Amos 4:1? The cows in Bashan, a fertile area northeast of the Sea of Galilee, were known for being fat. Like these cows, the women of Bethel were wealthy and lazy, doing little besides sitting around eating and drinking.

Architectural

How could Rahab have her house on a wall? (Josh. 2:15) The walls in Jericho were double walls with space between where dirt was built up so that houses could be built between them and yet be near the top of the walls.

Domestic

Was it not rude for John at the Last Supper to be leaning on Jesus? (John 13:23) No, they were seated on couches rather than in chairs when they ate, and therefore in that culture for someone to lean back against another was not considered rude.

Geographical

Why did Jesus speak of a man going "down" from Jerusalem to Jericho when Jericho is located northeast of Jerusalem? (Luke 10:30) The elevation drop in the 14 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho is more than 2,000 feet. Obviously going from Jerusalem to Jericho then was to go down in elevation.

Military

Why did Paul say in 2 Corinthians 2:14 that God "always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ"? In the Roman Empire, a general, returning home from a victorious battle, would march through the streets of his hometown with his own soldiers behind him, followed by his captives. Similarly, God is leading us in a triumphal procession spiritually by our being "in Christ."

Social

Why did Joseph shave before he went to see Pharaoh? (Gen. 41:14) Did not the Hebrews normally wear beards? The Egyptian custom was not to wear beards, so Joseph was simply following the custom of the country.

How to Bridge the Historical Gap

Now, in actual Bible study practice, how do you bridge the historical gap? The process is not difficult, but it does take some time and digging. Simply begin by looking for culturally conditioned words or phrases in your text. In a given passage, do you find any references to time, location, history, culture, custom, etc.? If so, take note of these for further research.

Speaking of further research, your goal is simply to understand the original cultural reference. This understanding comes from your knowledge of the original culture and setting of the text. So the big question is where does this knowledge of the original culture and setting of the text come from? There are two answers: biblical sources and extra-biblical sources.

1. Biblical Sources

First, by studying closely the text itself, its context, and even the entire Bible, you can piece together the meaning of certain culturally conditioned words or phrases. The greater your knowledge of Scripture as a whole, the easier this will be. This will come with time and practice. For now, try cross referencing the word or phrase in question to understand its meaning from several contexts.

Special Case Study—Titus 1:10

In this passage, Paul identifies “those of the circumcision” as being especially rebellious men who must be silenced because they are upsetting people, teaching things they should not. In the passage, Paul neither identifies who these men are (apart from being “of the circumcision”) nor does he identify what they were teaching. Do a study on “circumcision” in the Bible, not in reference to the physical practice, but in reference to the semi-Christian religious sect. A word search and cross reference of “circumcision” will turn up lots of Old Testament references to the physical practice, but you are interested in references to the religious sect, such as Philippians 3:1-11; Romans 2:17-29; Acts 10; Acts 15; and the entire book of Galatians. Study these passages to learn about “those of the circumcision” and what they are likely to teach.

2. Extra-Biblical Sources

In addition to the Bible itself, there is another source of knowledge of historical information. This comes in many forms, from ancient historians to archaeological discoveries to other writings. Reliable historical information can be taken into consideration, but always with a grain of salt, because these sources are not inspired like Scripture and not as authoritative. But they can shed light and add color to the historical background of the Bible. Knowledge from such extra-biblical sources is not necessary to understanding the meaning of Scripture, for the Bible itself unlocks its own meaning. But again outside information can produce a deeper understanding of what the Bible is saying. For instance, you can understand the simple fact that the worship of the pagan God Molech in the Old Testament was wrong for Israel, but by learning about the vicious child sacrifice performed in Molech worship from extra-biblical sources, you can better appreciate this offense to God.

Of course, it would take several lifetimes to try and compile an extensive historical knowledge of the biblical world, so this is where trustworthy resources come in. Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, manners and customs books, and other reference material really help in finding historical references.

Special Case Study—Titus 1:12

This verse contains a very culturally conditioned obscure reference to a native Cretan prophet as well as one of his sayings. What does this say about the inhabitants of Crete? What more can be known? The island of Crete only shows up a few places in Scripture and sheds no light on this reference. Use some of the extra-biblical resources below to try and shed light on this reference and see how this information might shed light on what Paul is saying in this verse.



Online Toolbox

Bible Encyclopedias and Topical Dictionaries

 <http://www.blueletterbible.org/search/Dictionary/viewEntries.cfm>

This site allows you to search through 10 resources all at once. Be sure to click “Check All,” then navigate to your word by letter. It contains:

- Condensed Biblical Cyclopedia
- International Standard Bible Encyclopedia
- The Thematic Subject Guide
- Smith’s Bible Dictionary
- Easton’s Bible Dictionary
- King James Dictionary
- Torrey’s New Topical Textbook
- Hitchcock’s Bible Names Dictionary
- Nave’s Topical Bible
- Vine’s Dictionary of New Testament Words

Charts, Outlines, Timelines, Images, and Maps

 <http://www.blueletterbible.org/study/#charts>

 <http://www.blueletterbible.org/images/>

 <http://bibleatlas.org/>

Manners and Customs


 <http://baptistbiblebelievers.com/OTStudies/MannersandCustomsInBibleLands1953/tabid/232/Default.aspx>

Table of Weights and Measures

 <http://www.biblica.com/en-us/bible/weights-and-measures/>

Step #7—Bridge (continued)

Part 2—The Grammatical Gap

Thankfully, as mentioned in part 1 of this lesson, the language gap has already been bridged by faithful Bible translators. You do not have to know Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic to study the Bible. Just have a faithful and reliable English translation on hand. That being said, even when it comes to understanding something written in English, there still is a grammatical gap that needs to be crossed. Most of the time, you probably take this for granted as it comes naturally to you as an English speaker, but the gap is still there.

What is language? Language as we know it is a rather complex system of communication. Human language was initially oral, where words and ideas were associated with particular sounds. But over the course of time, man invented written language, which is a way of associating those words and oral sounds with written symbols. Written language is just as complex as oral language and there is a gap for all in understanding it. A child will quite naturally pick up an oral language instinctively, but must be taught the corresponding written language. So a person's understanding of their written language largely hinges on their education. There are still many people in America who can speak and understand English just fine, but cannot read or write in English. To do so, they must learn the English symbols (i.e. alphabet), how the alphabet assembles (i.e. words), how those words assemble (i.e. sentences), how those sentences assemble (i.e. paragraphs), and how paragraphs assemble (i.e. books).

If you are reading this lesson, then you obviously already know how to read and understand the written English language. If you had to study some document in English, you are already equipped to do so, in a basic sense. However, when it comes to Scripture, there is no room for error and a casual study won't do, especially when discerning matters of eternal life and death. Therefore, even for English speakers, it is useful to re-educate yourself on the English language, so as to better help you in understanding the Bible in written English. That is the aim of this lesson.

In this lesson 4, part 2, you will learn about concepts you already know, but probably have not studied since high school. This lesson obviously cannot substitute for an entire course in English grammar, but it can provide some helpful reminders in an easy to understand way that will aid you in studying the Bible in English. Specifically, you will learn how to make sense of the different levels of the English language, from words to sentences to paragraphs to books.

Understanding Words

When studying the Bible, you are after the plain, normal, grammatical meaning of words. This may sound obvious, but it has not always been the case. Throughout much of church history, some have radically spiritualized or allegorized Scripture, making words mean whatever the interpreter wants them to mean. Thankfully, with the Reformation came the return to seek the

meaning of the words as determined by the original author in the text's original setting. That is what you are after now.

As you study a passage of Scripture, often times you will encounter unfamiliar words. Either you don't know what they mean or you don't know how they are being used. As a result you will do a **word study**.

The first step in a word study is often to consult a dictionary (specifically Greek or Hebrew lexicon or a theological dictionary). This is a useful step to learn the root meaning of the word, the range of meanings of the word, and how the word's meaning has changed over time. For example, by looking up "hospitable" from Titus 1:8 in a Greek-English lexicon, you will learn that the word is formed by cramming together the Greek word "love" with the Greek word "stranger," so literally it means "lover of strangers." However, many words have a wide range of meanings. Consulting a dictionary will give you that range of meaning, but it won't tell you how the word is being used in your specific text.

Therefore, the second step in a word study is cross referencing to find out how the same word is used elsewhere. First, look up how the same author has used the word in the same book and even in other books. This will tell you generally how the author uses that word. Doing a study of how your word is used throughout Scripture can sometimes also be fruitful, but you have to be careful, because the same word will be used differently in different places. For example, if you are studying John 3:16 and you want to know what the word "world" means (*kosmos*), you can look up all the ways John uses "world" in the gospel of John as well as 1-3 John and Revelation, but you will still come away with several possible meanings (e.g. the whole universe, planet earth, mankind, the evil system of those in rebellion against God, the system of earthly and social structures).

Because there is still a range of possible meaning, the third step in word study is the most important—context. The context will make clear how exactly the author is using a given word in a given instance. The dictionary definition of a word will give you its broad range of meaning, how the same author uses that word will give you some leads, but how the word is used in its context is the ultimate determiner of its meaning. Words are known by the company they keep. To help with this, in the context, look for the author to define the word himself. Look for additional phrases that explain the word, or for comparisons and contrasts that make its meaning clear. For instance, what does "dead" mean in Ephesians 2:1? The context makes clear that this is spiritual death, given the following phrase "in your trespasses and sins."

As you study words though, watch out for figures of speech, which break the normal rules of meaning. Always assume words have their plain meaning unless the context makes clear they are to be taken figuratively. Becoming familiar with some common figures of speech will help in identifying them as well.

- Simile- the stated comparison between two dissimilar things that share some quality, usually using “like” or “as” (James 1:10- “Like flowering grass he will pass away”)
- Metaphor- the implied comparison between two dissimilar things that share some quality, without using “like” or “as” (Psalm 23:1- “The Lord is my shepherd”)
- Euphemism- the substitution of an inoffensive term for an offensive one (John 11:11- “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep”)
- Hyperbole- the use of exaggeration for the sake of emphasis (Matthew 23:24- “You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel”)
- Irony- the use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning (Mark 7:9- “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition”)
- Metonymy- the substitution of one word or phrase for another with which it’s closely associated (Hebrews 13:4- “The marriage bed is to be undefiled”)
- Synecdoche- the use of a part to represent the whole (Romans 16:4- “Who for my life risked their own necks”)
- Personification- the ascribing of human characteristics to non-human objects (Isaiah 35:1- “The wilderness and the desert will be glad”)

Special Case Study—Titus 1:5, 7

Using the above instructions and guidelines and the below resources, do a word study on “elder” from Titus 1:5 and “overseer” from Titus 1:7. What do these words mean? How are they being used in their respective verses?



Online Toolbox

 <http://www.blueletterbible.org>

This is probably the best and easiest online tool for word studies. Search for your verse and click on the “C” next to it. This will open up a Lexicon/Concordance reference for every word/phrase in your verse. You now have two options:

1) Click on the word in the “English” column. This will take to you a concordance which lists every time this word is used in your English translation. This is useful for noting how the same word is used elsewhere, which might help you understand how it is being used in your verse.

2) Click on the reference next to your word under the “Strong’s” column. This will take you to a lexicon/dictionary page which will give you a good amount of information on your word. Here you will find:

- A Hebrew or Greek transliteration and pronunciation of your word
- The parts of speech
- The Vine’s Dictionary entry (just click on “View Entry”). This is a good dictionary for NT words
- An outline of biblical usage (i.e. dictionary listing)
- Thayer’s Lexicon (i.e. another dictionary listing)
- A translation count from the KJV. In other words, this is the number of times your word is translated a given way in the KJV.
- Strong’s concordance results

Exploring the above results will give you a good idea of what your word means, but you will still need to study the context of your verse to determine exactly how it’s being used in your verse.

 <http://www.studylight.org>

This site has a few extra word study resources. After searching for your verse, to the right you will see a “Study Resource List.” Click on the “RWP” link to see the entry for Robertson’s Word Pictures. Click on the “HBD” link to see the Holman Bible Dictionary listing.

 <http://www.dynamicbible.com>

A simple tool to find the Strong’s definition of a word, plus morphological analysis (i.e. parts of speech). This is useful for parsing verbs. Just enter your verse reference and click the underlined word.

Understanding Sentences

After learning the meaning of certain words, your concern shifts to how these words function together in a sentence. Words can play different roles and this of course impacts their meaning. Here is a very simple and brief refresher on the building blocks of sentences.

- Phrase- a short group of words without a verb
- Clause- a group of words with a subject (usually a noun) and a predicate (usually a verb)
 - Independent clause- a clause that can stand on its own as a complete thought (i.e. a sentence)
 - Dependent clause- a clause that does not express a complete thought but depends on another clause (i.e. incomplete sentence)

As stated above, a simple sentence is the same thing as an independent clause. It contains a subject and a verb and expresses a complete thought. Sentences can grow in complexity by adding more independent or dependent clauses, as well as phrases. The more you become familiar with identifying the main subject and verb in a sentence as opposed to other phrase and clauses, the better you will be able to interpret Scripture on your own.

Now here is a refresher regarding how individual words may function in a sentence:

- Subject—The subject of a sentence is the person, place, thing, or idea that is *doing* or *being* something.
- Verb—The verb of a sentence carries the idea of action or state of being. Verb “tense” is the time of the action (past, present, or future). Verb “voice” is the relationship between the action and the subject (active, passive). Verb “mood” is the kind of action described (indicative, imperative, interrogative).
- Direct Object—The direct object of a sentence is the receiver of the action within the sentence.
- Indirect Object—The indirect object of a sentence identifies to whom or for whom the action is performed. This can be a person, place, thing, or idea.

Example: “John threw the ball to me.”

Subject: John Verb: threw Direct Object: the ball Indirect Object: me

- Noun—A noun is a word or group of words which names a person, place, thing, or abstract concept. Nouns can be singular or plural in number, and masculine, feminine, or neuter in gender.
- Adjective—An adjective is a word or group of words which modifies (describes, limits, qualifies, quantifies, or makes exact) a noun or pronoun.

- Pronoun—A pronoun is a word which is used as a substitute for a noun (though pronouns have many other uses).
- Adverb—An adverb is a word or group of words which modifies (describes, limits, clarifies) verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs.
- Preposition—A preposition is a word which shows the relationship between a noun or pronoun and some other word in the sentence.
- Conjunction—A conjunction is a word or group of words which join two words, phrases, or clauses together.

Special Case Study—Mathew 28:19-20

Study this Great Commission passage and identify the main subject of the passage as well as the main verb. Then identify all of the modifying phrases. You will need to look up the verb moods of the original underlying Greek words to get this right. Use the resources below to help. What is the main command of the Great Commission?



Online Toolbox

 <http://www.biblehub.com/interlinear>

Just type in your passage in the bar and you will see an interlinear translation of the Greek or Hebrew into English. This makes matching up the original word to the corresponding English word much easier for those not knowing the original languages. Also, hover your mouse over the verbs to see their parsing. This will help you identify the original verb tense, mood, and voice, person, and number.

Understanding Paragraphs

In an earlier study, you learned a simple way to identify paragraphs in Scripture, namely by looking for the bold verse numbers to indicate the start of a new paragraph. Paragraphs represent units of thought or subject matter and they are a good way of breaking down a larger passage of Scripture into simple units.

Now, once you have a paragraph identified, your task is to try and identify that main thought. In the simplest form, the main thought will be identified by the main subject and predicate (e.g. the main noun and verb). Try and find the main noun and verb of the paragraph. Sometimes there are several though and your task becomes trying to figure out how they relate to one another. To make matters a little more complex, many passages are loaded with other clauses or phrases, which modify the main sentence. This can seem like a tangled web of words, but you can simplify things by getting the main subject and predicate and then identifying how everything else relates to it.

To help with breaking down a paragraph like this, it is useful to start block diagramming. Granted, this step intimidates many people. It's not essential, but it is helpful, and you might be surprised how much you really can do if you put some effort into it. Again, this guide can't substitute for a whole course in block diagramming, but you can learn a very simple way to visually arrange a paragraph so as to easily see the main point and all supporting thoughts. Here are some simple steps to follow with your paragraph using a blank sheet of paper:

1. Write down the main clause (the subject (noun) and predicate (verb)) at the left margin
2. Write down all supporting phrases, clauses, and words directly under the words they modify
 - a. Vertically line up parallel clauses/phrases/words
 - b. Place conjunctions in brackets

This is about as simple as you can get with block diagramming. Remember, the goal is to simplify a paragraph by visually showing the main thought and how all other thoughts relate to and modify it. As beginners, do not worry about all the technical details, but aim for getting the main thought right as well as all modifying thoughts. This in itself goes a long way in understanding what your paragraph is all about. Practice makes perfect and examples help, so see the last page of this study for illustrations.



Online Toolbox

 http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/diagrams2/one_pager1.htm

This is a great resource for learning sentence diagramming, which is far more technical than block diagramming, but will really help your grasp of sentences and even paragraphs.

Understanding Books

Part of the grammar gap has to do with the genre of the book of the Bible you are studying, for different genres have some different characteristics. Identifying the genre of your book (or of your passage) is helpful in letting you know what to expect.

What is genre? Genre is a separate category of literature that has its own distinct form, style, or subject matter. You are already familiar with genre, even if you don't know it. Just take the newspaper, for example. Newspapers contain different sections, each representing its own genre. There is the front page, the sports page, the cooking page, the business page, the editorial page, the comics page, and more. Each of these pages has its own distinct style of writing, subject matter, form, and even vocabulary. If you were reading a novel and saw the phrase "DJI 12767.57 +2.56" you would be very confused as this violates many rules of grammar and makes no sense. But if you read this phrase on a business page, recognizing the genre and context, you would understand its meaning as a stocks ticker. The same goes for the comics page, for example. There, you are going to expect irony and satire, whereas on the cooking page, you are going to expect very literal meaning of the recipes.

The Bible also contains many different genres and it's good to recognize these and take them into account when seeking a given passage's meaning. Here are some of the more prominent biblical genres, adapted from *Power in the Pulpit* by Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix:

- Prose—This form is the normal daily speech of mankind. Most of the conversational texts in the Bible as well as the epistles fall into this category.
- Poetry—One third of the Old Testament is poetry. Old Testament poetry does not rhyme. Rather, the expressions contain a parallelism of ideas. The Psalms and Song of Solomon are poetic books.
- Historical Narrative—This type of literature is present in the for gospels and the book of Acts, as well as in several books in the first part of the Old Testament.
- Wisdom—Much of this literature is reflective and philosophical in nature. Such books as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes fall into this category.
- Prophetic—Although prophetic material can be considered a species of prose, this literature has a nature all its own. Making up approximately 22 percent of the Bible, prophetic material is largely sermonical in nature and can have both immediate and future relevance.
- Parables—Parables are a type of comparative literature that utilizes story. These stories contain an element of reality and are intended either to clarify a spiritual truth or deliberately leave the hearer with a certain amount of confusion.

In Bible study, the more you can become familiar with these genres and their characteristics, the better you will understand how a given passage is meant to be understood.

Step #7—Bridge (continued)

Part 3—The Contextual Gap

The final major gap to bridge is the contextual gap. What is context? Context is a way of describing the setting and surroundings of your verse. In any given writing, the context consists of that which precedes and follows a selected passage. Most directly, this involves the immediately surrounding sentences, but the context expands outward. In the Bible, the context of a given paragraph starts with the surrounding paragraphs, then the surrounding chapter, then the surrounding section, and then the surrounding book. And in a way, any passage must be interpreted in light of the context of the entire Bible, since it is a unified, inspired work.

But why is it so important to study the context when all you want to do is study a single verse or paragraph? Well, hopefully you already understand that the context has a vast impact on the meaning of your single verse or paragraph. Especially in Scripture, you cannot understand the part rightly without understanding the whole.

Take the human body, which is comprised of a multitude of different body parts. As a simple exercise, try and give a simple definition of the following body parts: the heart, the brain, and the lungs. What did you come up with? For comparison, here are some dictionary definitions:

Heart—A hollow, pumplike organ of blood circulation...located in the chest between the lungs and slightly to the left and consisting of four chambers...that receive and send oxygenated blood throughout the body.

Brain—The part of the central nervous system enclosed in the cranium, consisting of a soft, convoluted mass of gray and white matter and serving to control and coordinate mental and physical actions.

Lung—Either one of a pair of spongy saclike respiratory organs within the thorax, which oxygenate the blood and remove its carbon dioxide.

Now notice how the definition of these body parts is dependent upon the definitions of other body parts. The heart cannot be understood apart from understanding the blood, the chest, the lungs, and blood vessels. The same can be said of the brain, the lungs, and all body parts. The point is that each part of the human body does not exist by itself, but in relation to others. This interdependency can be seen as the body's "context." The heart and lungs are not the same organ, but understanding one helps you understand the other.

This can be likened to studying the Bible in context. Bible passages do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in a context, from a chapter to a book to the entire Bible, and knowing this context helps you know the passage. In fact, this step, bridging the context gap, is near the top of the list in Bible study, because no matter what your historical and grammatical studies turn up, it is your contextual study that gives you the most authoritative information on your passage's meaning.

However, this forms a huge problem today, for given the vast importance of this step, studying the context is one of the most neglected steps. The church today is plagued by people and preachers taking verses out of context. This practice is called proof-texting where one-liners are extracted from the Bible, taken out of context, and used as the teacher desires. Some people treat the Bible like a magical book, which can be made to mean whatever the interpreter wants it to mean. But such people fail to realize that the meaning of the Bible is determined by the author and therefore taking verses out of context leads to the wrong meaning and improper application.

As an illustration, here are some of the most common passages taken out of context. How have you heard these used before? Yet what do these verses truly teach?

- Isaiah 55:8-9
- Jeremiah 29:11
- Matthew 7:1
- Matthew 18:20
- Philippians 4:13
- 1 John 4:8b

A proper study of the context prevents such abuses. The need for studying the context was introduced in an earlier Bible study stage (i.e. the “read” stage). Now it is time to more formally define a given passage’s context and how to study it so that you can take it into account when determining your passage’s meaning. What should you look for? There are three basic levels of context to explore.

The Immediate Context

The immediate context of a Bible passage is the surrounding sentences and paragraphs of your text. Read through these and your passage several times. Identify any relationships between your text and that which comes before or after. Look for some of the same or similar words. As studied in the grammatical gap, the dictionary will give you a range of meaning for a given word, but the context will tell you which of those meanings is being used in the passage. So use this immediate context to determine the meaning of key words.

Also look for comparisons and contrasts. Is the author building on a previous point in your passage? Is he adding to what he said before? Is he developing an argument? If so, how? How does your passage contribute to his greater thought? Or is the author changing topics? Is he making a contrast? If so, what is his point? Related to the author’s topic, is the author changing subject in your context. For example, if the author’s subject matter was Jewish Christians in the previous passage, is there any indication that this subject has changed? If so,

to whom? All in all, your goal is to read and study the context to clarify the meaning of your own passage.

Special Case Study

In Titus 3:1, to whom does the word “them” refer? Who is the subject of verses 1-2?
In Titus 2:9-10, the command “urge” is not in the original text. Why did the translators add “urge” (indicated by italics)? What is Paul’s message to bondslaves?

Use the immediate context to find the answer.

The Section Context

With the section context, you are taking another step back and looking at your passage from a broader perspective. Now you are no longer limited to the immediately surrounding sentences, but you want to consider what section your passage is in, which may range over several chapters. What can you learn about your passage from what section it is in?

First off, how do you know what section your passage is in? Well during an earlier Bible study step (i.e. Familiarize), you were to create or find a good outline for your book. By studying the book as a whole, you were to identify the major sections representing different subjects, topics, or arguments. Now is the time to refer to your outline and find out what larger section your passage is in. Next, try and identify some of the characteristics of your section. What is the main subject, topic, or argument? Then, how does your passage fit into this? Or does your passage stand out and provide contrast?

Take as a classic example the Sermon on the Mount, which forms a well-known and easy to identify section in Matthew’s gospel (chapters 5-7). If you are studying Matthew 5:48, the immediate context will help you identify Christ’s audience and there is a nearby mention of the heavenly Father. But an understanding of this entire section is needed to grasp the significance of this verse. Through study of the whole sermon, you have to realize what Jesus was trying to accomplish. The scribes and Pharisees had actually lowered God’s standard through their system of man-made tradition, but Jesus was rightly reminding the people that God’s true standard is utter perfection. Of course, this is an unattainable standard, but that is precisely the point of the law—to convict of sin and drive people to God for mercy.

The Book Context

With the book context, now you are taking into account the entire flow of thought or argument of the entire book to see how your passage fits in and contributes. Your outline of the entire book has identified the major sections. Each of these major sections is characterized by its own subject matter or argument. In epistles, for example, the author is developing an argument or

making a case throughout, and each section contributes to the whole. Your goal with the book context is to understand the overall aim or argument of your book as well as how each section fits in. You are trying to really pin down the purpose of the whole book and then discover how each major section, including the one your passage is in, fits into that purpose.

Imagine a quilt being held together by one really long piece of thread. All of the patches are different and unique, but they are made one by this thread. When it comes to the book context, you are trying to find this thread. The word context used to literally refer to something woven together and that's still a helpful concept. In any given writing, biblical or otherwise, there is almost always a unifying theme, subject matter, argument, or thought running throughout. Like a thread, this theme unites all the smaller parts into a whole. Try and find this thread. This will help put your passage and your section into perspective.

What is the process for finding this thread? How do you find the main thought running throughout? Sometimes it's easy, for the author himself tells you plainly (e.g. 1 John 5:13; John 20:30-31). Look for a direct indication of the book's purpose in the introduction or conclusion. But it's not always this easy. Through a study of the entire book, you will have to discern for yourself the main point. Look for clear exhortations or imperatives, places where the author is stating his will or aim. Look at the different sections and ask why is this being written? What problems are being solved, what questions are being answered, what needs are being addressed?

Arriving at this on your own will require a lot of time reading the entire book several times through. Do your best to find this on your own, but it's also good to consult the introductions of some commentaries for help in discovering the main purpose of your book.