

How to Read the Bible: Illumination and Context

Chapter 3 – Illumination: Truth from the Top Down



A. Illumination

1. Reading the Bible is a spiritual and a rational process.

- John 8:43-47

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. ⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. ⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? ⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. *The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.*"

- 2 Tim 2:15

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

- 2 Pet 3:15-16

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶ as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are *hard to understand*, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

2. We must read the Bible in submission to the Holy Spirit.

- He illuminates what he inspired!
 - 2 Tim 3:16-17

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

- 2 Pet 1:20-21

knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

- Only believers can truly understand the significance of the text.
 - 1 Cor 2:12-14

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. ¹³ And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. ¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

- The Spirit does not change the meaning of the text, nor does he reveal secret meanings.
- The Holy Spirit moved in men to write what he wanted them to write in the way he wanted them to write it. We would be foolish to ignore the way in which he inspired these men and focus only on the words.

B. Context

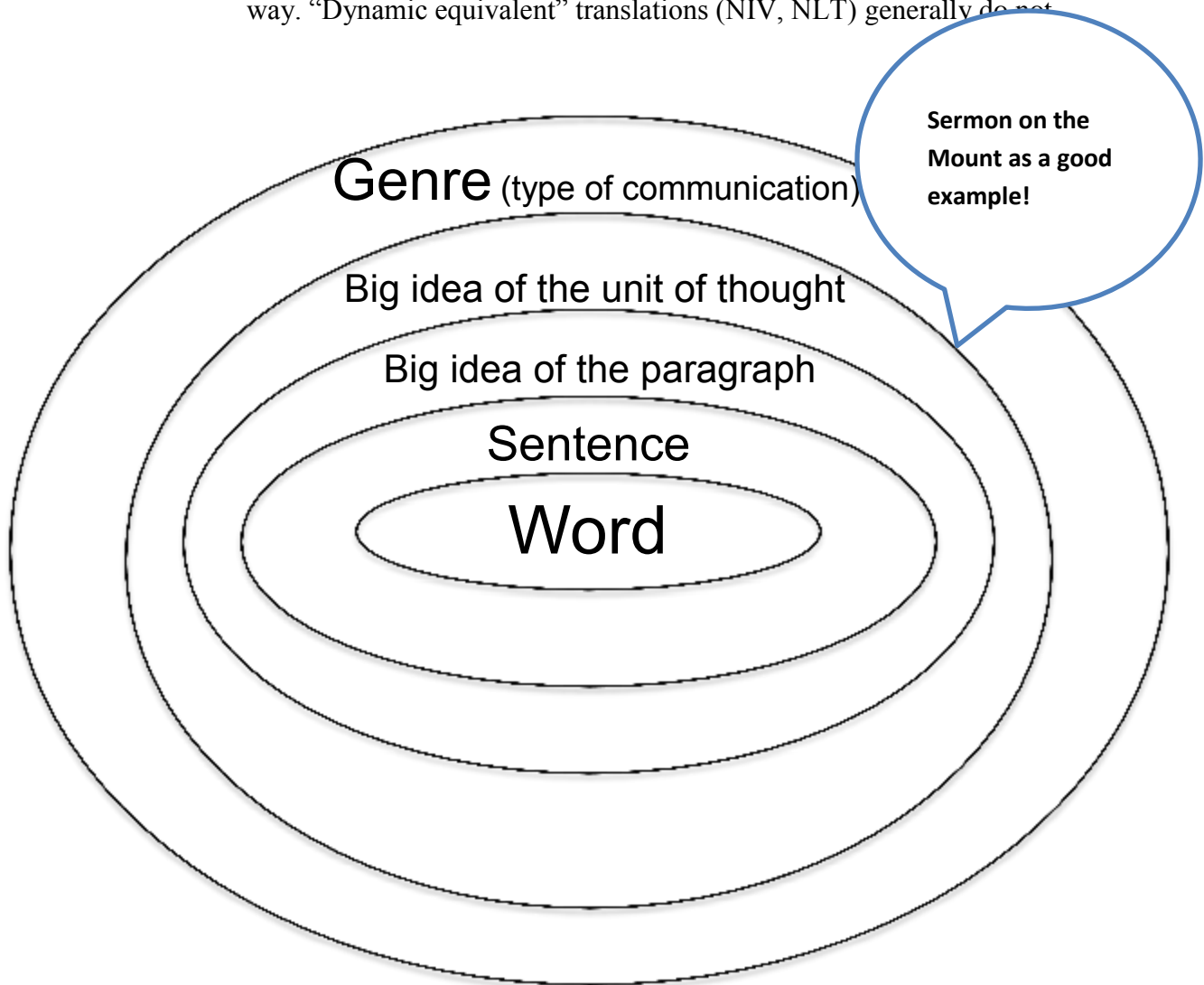
The three most important things in real estate are location, location, location. Similarly . . .

1. The three most important things in Bible interpretation are context, context, context.

Let me give you just a real practical example that gives you an illustration of context. Imagine a stop sign. A stop sign. A red octagon with “stop” written in white on the front of it. Now, when you see the stop sign, it’s going to depend on where you see it that’s going to affect what you do. So, if you were driving and you come to a four-way intersection, and you see a stop sign, then you’re going to come to a stop, and you’re going to be there for eight seconds. You’re going to look to the left and to the right, and then you’re going to move forward, right? That’s what you do. Now, on the road it means one thing, but imagine you’re walking through an antique shop, and you see an old, ragged stop sign from a historic place. When you’re walking through that antique shop, are you immediately going to stop, wait eight seconds, look to your left and to your right and then continue moving toward it? Do you pick up a brochure, and on the front it grabs your attention by saying, “stop,” and you’re walking along the road, are you going to stop, look left and right and keep moving forward? When you are saying something to your wife, for example, that is bothering her, annoying her even, and she looks at you and she says, “stop,” what are you going to do? Well, you’re not going to look both ways. You’re going to look down. When you are looking at your wife, and you’re saying all kinds of beautiful, lovely things to her about how beautiful and lovely she is, and she looks at you and she says, “stop,” what are you

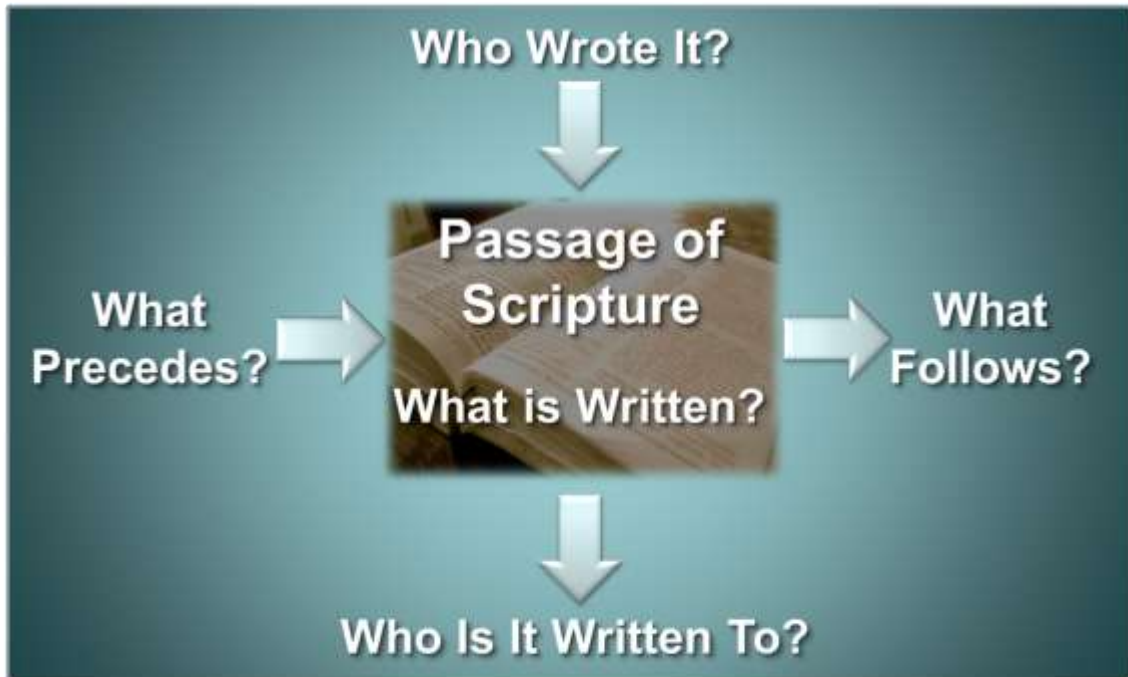
going to do? You're going to keep going. Context shapes meaning. Same "stop" in different places means different things, so we've got to look at the context to understand the meaning.

- "A text without a context is a pretext."
2. Meaning comes from the top down, not from the bottom up, from the larger units of Scripture to the smaller units.
 - "The smaller the passage being studied, the greater chance of error."
 3. Paragraphs usually show a complete thought or statement.
 - More literal translations (ESV, NASB, KJV, NKJV) divide up paragraphs this way. "Dynamic equivalent" translations (NIV, NLT) generally do not.



4. Three types of context:

- Literary Context
 - Genres
 1. Play according to the rules.
 2. You can't play basketball by the rules of football!
 - Grammar
- Historical-cultural Context
 - Author
 - Audience
 - Geography
 - Culture
 - Religion, Politics, Economy, etc.
- Theological Context
 - Progressive revelation – For 1,500 years God slowly revealed more and more of himself and his plan.
 - “The Bible appears like a symphony orchestra, with the Holy Ghost as its Toscanini, each instrument has been brought willingly, spontaneously, creatively, to play his notes just as the great conductor desired, though none of them could ever hear the music as a whole...The point of each part only becomes fully clear when seen in relation to all the rest.” – J. I. Packer



C. Test Case – Matthew 18:19-20

‘Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.’

- Some take this as a guarantee of answered prayer if at least two or three are present.
- Some take from this that Jesus is present in a special way any time two or three Christians are gathered together.
- Where does the paragraph begin?
- What precedes the paragraph and what follows the paragraph?
- “Two or three” – This reflects the Old Testament practice of requiring more than one witness to “establish a charge” (Deut 19:15).
- The immediate context is clearly church discipline (vv. 15-17).
- Jesus is reassuring his disciples that in the future, when they enact church discipline in the church, he will be right there in the middle of that mess, approving of right practices.

D. Put it into practice!

1. Jer 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

2. 2 Chron 7:14

if my people who are called by my name ahumble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

3. Rev 3:20

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.