

# **BIB105 Biblical Hermeneutics**

## Unit 3c Literary Context

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All right. Welcome back. Great to be with you again. Remember last lesson, we took a look at historical, cultural contexts. And in this lesson, we're going to get into the literary context and see what that is. So let's go ahead and get started. Literary context is the literary genre. Well, what is genre? That refers to a type of literature. Some examples from the Old Testament. You have narrative, law, poetry, prophecy, and wisdom. And we'll get into more details on each of these a little bit later in another lesson, but I just wanted to give you an overview. And then New Testament examples. We have gospel, history, letter, and apocalyptic literature, which is very different than anything else really.

So, a couple of things about literary context that you have to keep in mind. First thing is it's dealing with the surrounding context, so you're talking about the paragraphs and the chapters before and after the passage that you're studying. So if you're doing a study on Romans 12:1-2 about offering up your bodies as living sacrifices to God and not being conformed to this world, the immediate literary context is in Romans 11, the previous chapter, and then the remaining part of Romans 12. So when you're studying Romans 12:1-2, just don't look at that in a vacuum. You have to look at what is being said before and after because, as we've seen before, the authors were intentional. God was very intentional in putting these verses in the order that he wanted.

Some dangers, though, when it comes to literary context. First of all, simply ignoring the surrounding context. One of the examples that's one of my personal favorites is from Matthew 18:20, which many have interpreted that as a prayer meeting where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst, which sounds great, *but* when you look at the actual context of that passage, not really talking about just a general prayer meeting. So let's take a look. I just want to show you what I mean by that. So Matthew 18:15-20. Let's just read this together. "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

So although commonly interpreted as a prayer meeting, the actual context is dealing with leaders of a church and the discipline of a believer who refuses to repent of their sin. So the process, as Christ lays out very clearly, is one person to go in private, confront the brother or sister who's in sin, and give them an opportunity to talk through it and to see the error of their ways and to repent. But if they refuse to repent, then to take two or three witnesses, not just gossip buddies but witnesses. And if they still refuse to repent of the sin that is very obvious, then you got to go to the church. And if they still refuse to repent in front of the church leadership, then the prayer of those leaders and the request of discipline from those leaders will be bound in heaven. God wants us to live holy lives, and so this is something that really isn't done much today in churches, unfortunately. But that accountability is very important.

So anyway, we want to make sure that we understand the context of a passage. There's plenty of other verses that deal with prayer and believers in prayer, and we see the power of that. So I'm not saying that you can't have a group of believers together praying and there is no power. There obviously is. We

see plenty of examples with like Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail and the believers praying for Peter to be released from prison. So again, there's plenty of examples of prayer being effective. But this particular verse isn't talking about just a general prayer meeting. And so you may see that as nitpicking, but again, we're establishing a pattern as we approach any passage. We want to make sure that we're doing our part and not adding to the text something that simply isn't there. So I think you get the point on that.

Let's move on to the next danger. And please know that I'm not against topical preaching. Very valid form of preaching, and I think all of us have pastors and preachers that have online ministries, etc., more public ministries that are excellent topically. But one of the dangers that you have to be careful of is not providing context when you are looking at a specific verse. For example, the one we just talked about. We were looking at Matthew 18 and a prayer meeting. Well, if you're doing a topical series on prayer and you just talk about the power of prayer and you bring in this passage from Matthew 18:20 and the context of that is actually about church discipline but you don't bring that up in the topical message, again, you could think I'm kind of splitting hairs here, but it's very important that we try to get the full context because that will help us understand the meaning and to interpret things accurately.

So expository preaching, for example. If you're looking at Romans 1:18-32 which talks about the decline of a culture, rejecting God and walking away, and then God gave them over to the desires of their heart, and eventually all the way down to depravity. And so you have Paul's orderly thinking from verse 18 to verse 32, and those thoughts, and then Paul's conclusion. And then the preacher is working through that process and showing that to the congregation. And so you're being consistent with the context of those verses and it tends to lend itself to being more accurate with the context of those verses. Topical preaching then takes different thoughts from different passages, may not look at the full context and flow of thought from each verse used. And again, it definitely has its place, but make sure you do your homework when teaching a passage. We are to be handling God's word accurately, to do our due diligence, to make sure that we understand everything that the Scripture...just trying to nail down what God intended in his message to us. I don't want to belabor that point. So let's move on, then.

How to identify the surrounding context. It's important to identify how the book is divided. We see this in Scripture. There are paragraphs and there are sections. Of course, translators and those who have put the Scriptures together have sometimes done that for you. They've marked the paragraphs and the chapter headings which were not included in the original manuscripts. The apostle Paul was not writing chapter and verse as he was writing his letter to the Philippians, for example. That was something that was added later for our reference point to be able to find passages more quickly.

So if you look at the paragraphs and the sections, how do you kind of know the division points? There's some keys, a couple of them. You have conjunctions. For example, the words "therefore," "then," "but" show paragraphs and sections and a dividing point there. A change of genre. Maybe we'll see sometimes in some of the Davidic writings that he breaks into psalm and there's a bit of poetry. Solomon, we see that with Ecclesiastes 3 when he has that song. There is a time for everything and a season for everything under the sun. And so that kind of breaks away from the proverbial message and gets into some poetry. And so we see that genre change. And so that would be another natural breaking point. Change of topic or theme, of course, is an obvious one. Changes in time, location, or setting. And then

grammatical changes. If it's flashing back and going past tense in a particular narrative, that may be another key indicator that you're looking at a paragraph or a section.

Some other things to look for when you're identifying the surrounding context. Summarize the main idea of each section in about a dozen words or less. It's very helpful if you can look, go back to the example from Romans 12:1-2. If you go back to Romans 11, read through it, summarize some of the paragraphs in that chapter leading up to Romans 12, and then also summarize some of the paragraphs following Romans 12:1-2 that continue on into chapter 12. That will give you a clearer flow of thought from Paul as he's writing to the Romans. And then explain how your particular passage relates to the surrounding sections. So if you're, again, going to be giving a Bible lesson or a message, make sure that you are connecting the dots with the sections before and after.

All right. That was a real simple and sweet lesson on literary context. Again, say it in triplicate, like I do with my students. Context, context, context. And so you've got the historical and cultural context that you've got to do a little legwork with some of those extra biblical resources, like commentaries, atlases, and concordances, etc. But then you also have got to do your work within the text itself, which is you're looking at the verses before and after and doing your due diligence, if you will, for that. So it's a great lesson, something that hopefully is helpful to you. Next, we're going to get into the word studies. How do you do a word study? What are some of the resources available? And hopefully, that will be helpful as you continue to improve as a student.