

2. General Rules for Studying the Bible

1) Know the **Context!**

- Unless you first see and understand the context, any attempt to correctly understand its various parts is doomed.
 - (1) You must understand the author's point, what he's saying. You need to know where the thought of the text starts and how it is developed (this isn't always easy, especially with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes).
 - (2) It is very easy to ignore the context and the author's flow of thought and take a verse or phrase out of context. This tends to load words and phrases with meaning that may not be what the author intended.

Matthew 18:17 "listen to the church"

- Different kinds of contexts you need to take into account

(1) The **book** itself

The author's purpose in writing, the sections of the book, its major theme. Parts have no meaning in themselves; they must be understood in connection with the whole.

Philippians 4:4 "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"

(2) The **section** of the book

This refers to the major blocks of material in a book and how the passage relates to where it is "at" in the book. This means you have to really know the book or at least have a good outline available to help you see where you are at.

Example: the book of Revelation has these main divisions—

Chapter 1	The things which you have seen (the vision of Christ)
Chapters 2–3	The things which are (the churches)
Chapters 4–22	The things which shall be hereafter
4–19	Tribulation period
20	Millennium
21–22	Eternal Kingdom

Revelation 14:6 **does not refer to current spread of the gospel via radio waves!**

(3) The **immediate** context of the passage

- (a) This refers primarily to the **paragraph**, and involves the different clauses and phrases of the passage. You need to trace the flow of thought in the passage. Study paragraphs and sentences, not **verses**.
- (b) This is probably the most important of the different kinds of contexts, and really is the final judge of meaning. There is no guarantee that an author uses a word or term always in the same way in his writings. Every word can be used in different ways but context almost always narrows the possibilities down to one intended meaning.

Galatians 6:7–8 Sowing and reaping (**context is giving to the Lord's work**)

(4) **Parallel** passages

There is a difference between parallel passages that use the same words and passages that mean the same thing.

- (a) There are passages that use the same words but mean different things in their contexts.

Matt 16:19 and 18:18 Binding and loosing (**16:19 context is the kingdom; 18:18 context is the local church, church discipline**)

- (b) There are passages that refer to the same idea or event and thus can be very helpful to interpretation.

Matt 10:37 and Luke 14:26 “Hating” father and mother

2) **Examine the Meaning of the Words**

- The best tool for word study is a lexicon because it deals with words. Also, use different translations, Bible dictionaries, and study Bibles to learn what the various words mean.
- Remember the four principles of word meanings from pages 27–30.
- Studying words

(1) How is this word used in *this* context?

(2) How is this word used elsewhere in *this* book? Keep in mind that an author can use one word different ways.

Matt 8:22 “let the dead bury their dead” – same word in a single context with different meanings

- (3) How does the author use this word in different books? Don't forget what we just learned in #2 though!

Paul's use of "mystery" in Romans 16:25–26; Ephesians 3; and Colossians 1 & 2

- (4) How is this word used in other passages in the Bible?

Use a concordance to help you trace down different places where words are used. Don't forget that it is an *English* concordance! One Hebrew or Greek word can be translated different ways, so you need to be aware of this. As well, the same English word can represent different Hebrew or Greek words. Often "exhaustive concordances" will have a means by which you can see the Hebrew or Greek word that the English word is translated from. Study the instructions in the front of the concordance to learn how to do this.

- Pay attention to synonyms.

When two words with similar or nearly the same meaning are used in the same context, they probably have the same meaning.

Genesis 1:26–26 "Image" and "likeness"

John 21:15–17 "love" translated from *agapao* and *phileo* (cf. Matt 23:6 [*phileo*]; Luke 11:43 [*agapao*])

- Study paragraphs and larger blocks

A good paragraph study Bible is a must for interpreting the Bible correctly. Just like with words, you cannot exclusively focus on a clause or sentence apart from its context. Sentences form paragraphs around certain units of thought, topics, or themes.

- (1) **Find the unit of thought**. Ask, "what's the point?" What is the author saying? Why does he say it?
- (2) **Look for connectors**. These are words that show changes in the flow of thought. Examples are "since," "for," "because," and "therefore." This helps you to follow the author's argument within a paragraph and from one paragraph to another.

EXAMPLE: Romans 5

v. 1 "therefore"

12 "therefore" – introduces an analogy between adam and Christ that further explains justification.

12,18 "just as" is completed by "even so," with a parenthesis in between

16 "on the one hand...but on the other

19,20 "for as...even so"

3) What is the **Purpose** of the Book?

- The importance of knowing the author's purpose in writing
 - (1) It keeps you from attaching ideas to the book that are not there
 - (2) It helps you truly understand the different parts of a book
- Finding out the author's purpose in writing

(1) The author's **statements**

Eccl 12:13

Luke 1:1–4

John 20:31

(2) The author's **exhortations**

Hebrews 10:19–23; 10:32–35; 12:1–3

“Let us...” Heb 4:1, 11; 6:1; 12:1; 13:15

(3) The author's selection and arrangement of **material**

1–2 Chronicles emphasizes David and the Davidic kings. It centers on the temple and its worship. Much detail is given on “good kings,” whereas there is little detail on their faults. God's covenant promises are in view.

Chronicles is not just “history.” Its purpose was to encourage Jews living after the exile to remain faithful to God and His institutions. Then God's blessing and favor would be on them. Chronicles shows the Jews their ties to the Davidic promises.

By contrast the Books of Kings are almost the opposite, although both Kings and Chronicles cover the same basic history. 1–2 Kings emphasizes the sins of Israel, their failures and disobedience, causing the division of the monarchy and the eventual captivities to Assyria and Babylon. It was written while the Jews were in the Exile, basically answering the question, “Why are we here?”