

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

TOOL 1: CONTEXT



The first tool to add to your toolbox is context. Simply put, context is the details and settings that surround the words **of** the book that give the words **in** the book their proper meaning.

And this works in everyday life too. One of my favorite TV shows is *Friends*. And in the show, there's a famous line that goes like this, "Pivot! Pivot! Pivooooot!" Now if you've ever seen the TV show and you're reading this line, you probably just laughed to yourself as your mind's eye pictured the setting in which that line took place. You are able to remember the poor decisions and hilarious banter that led up to that line. But, for those of you haven't, that line makes absolutely no sense. To you, they're just words. And without context, you'll never grasp the fullness of their meaning or importance.

A lot of times, that's the way that we approach scripture—without any context. Because of this, we don't know what the words in Scripture mean. Without context, they're just words on a page, and any attempt to apply them is like throwing darts in the dark—a blind guess.

Understanding the context of any passage of Scripture is easier than you may think! Any time you are trying to understand the context of a particular book or passage in the Bible, answer the following key questions. As an example, we'll do it for the book of Philippians.

1. When was the book written (date)?
2. What is book's literary type (genre)?
3. Who wrote the book (author)?
4. To whom was the book being written (audience)?
5. For what purpose was the book being written (reason)?

Before we answer the questions, I want to tell you something that will make this process much easier: use resources. Don't think that you have to memorize all of this stuff. Resources like the ESV Study Bible and Reformation Study Bible App are great places to start.

WHEN WAS THE BOOK WRITTEN?

The Bible is one book made up of several smaller books, Philippians included, that work together to tell one big story about God redeeming a people for himself. So knowing when a book was written will tell us a lot about what part this book plays in telling the whole story. Thanks to a little bit of research, we know that Philippians was written between the years 60 and 62 AD.

But why are dates important? Good question! They're more helpful when we remember Jesus' life spanned from approx.. 4 B.C. to 30 A.D. Since Philippians was written after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, we know that the book is no longer going to be telling us about a Messiah who will come or the Savior who has come and is doing ministry; instead, this book is going to be telling us about the Messiah who did come, who did do ministry, who did die, and who did rise again for his people. Philippians' role in the Bible's grand story of redemption is explaining the gospel and its implications on the daily lives of redeemed people.

WHAT IS THE BOOK'S LITERARY TYPE?

Not only is Scripture made up of different books written at different times, but it also contains different types of literature! There's historical books, prophetic books, wisdom literature, song books, gospels, and epistles.

Philippians is an epistle, or a letter.

WHO WROTE THE BOOK?

Letters have authors. Sometimes, if the author doesn't specifically identify himself, it can be difficult to determine the identity of the writer; thankfully though, the author of Philippians identifies himself (and his aid) in the first line of the book, writing, "*Paul* and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus." So the apostle Paul is the writer, aided along by Timothy!

Since we know Paul is the writer, we can look to his life history to find out what was happening in his life between 60-62 A.D. when he wrote the letter to the Philippians. By doing a quick bit of research, we can gather at least two things: first, Paul was in prison when he wrote this book, and second, he knew the audience well.

TO WHOM WAS THE BOOK BEING WRITTEN?

Letters also have audiences, meaning that Philippians is written with a specific recipient in mind, much the same way that when you and I write a letter, we address it to a specific person. After naming himself in the first line of the book, he names his intended recipient in the second, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi..." Paul's specific target audience for this letter is the church (the saints) in the city of Philippi. This isn't a letter for everyone, or even just one man or woman—it's a letter for the whole church!

To get a better understanding of Paul's prior relationship with the church in Philippi, read Acts 16 and 2 Cor. 8:1-5. You'll definitely want to check your study Bible for the historical and cultural context of the city, too. Try to figure out Philippi's location, what type of jobs were common, and other major religions the citizens may have adhered to, etc. All of this will help you make sense of the book as you study. .

FOR WHAT PURPOSE WAS THE BOOK BEING WRITTEN?

When you or I receive a gift, we write a thank you card. Likewise, Paul wrote letters for specific purposes. Sometimes a letter's purpose was to answer a problem in the church; sometimes it was to answer questions that the church might have; and other times, he wrote to encourage the church. In Philippians, we find that Paul's purpose in writing the letter was twofold: (1) to thank them for their faithful friendship during his ministry (1:3-11; 4:10-20), and (2) to encourage them in their faith, taking every opportunity to point them toward true joy found in Christ alone.

Now, it's your turn. Try filling out the Context Worksheet as a help for the context of Philippians or any other book! And remember, you can always ask for help!