

The World Behind the Text.

Historical-cultural context—recovering what God said to them, so we can hear what he says to us.

PAUL TO TIMOTHY · 2 TIMOTHY 4:21 · ESV

“Do your best to come
before winter.”

Read flat, it's a lonely man asking for a visit. Read in context, it's something else entirely.

ONE PHRASE, UNLOCKED

The background is the plea.

THE FACTS BEHIND THE WORDS

Timothy is in **Ephesus**; Paul is imprisoned in **Rome** — hundreds of miles apart.

Ancient **sea travel closed in winter** — dangerous from mid-September, shut down November to March.

Paul is awaiting **execution**. He has also asked for his cloak, books, and parchments.

WHAT PAUL IS REALLY SAYING

*“Get on a ship now, before the lanes close
— reach me before they put me to death.
Come quickly, my son, before it's too late.”*

Same words. Utterly different weight. That is what historical-cultural context does.

BECAUSE OF HOW GOD CHOSE TO SPEAK

It was their Word first.

God didn't dictate the Bible in the first person to everyone, everywhere, at once. He spoke *through* human writers, to *real people*, in a particular time and a particular culture.

Every passage was “God's Word to other people before it became God's Word to us.”

If we honor how God spoke, we take their world seriously — we don't skip straight to ourselves.

THE INTERPRETIVE RULE

A valid interpretation must fit the *historical-cultural context* of the text.

“The true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken.” — Fee & Stuart

If your reading wouldn't have made sense back then, you're probably on the wrong track.

ANYTHING OUTSIDE THE TEXT THAT HELPS YOU UNDERSTAND IT**Three places to look.****AREA 01****The Writer**

*His background,
ministry, relationship to
the readers — and above
all, why he wrote.*

AREA 02**The Audience**

*Who received it, and the
situation they were
facing when it arrived.*

AREA 03**The Elements**

*Geography, politics,
religion, economics,
social custom —
whatever the passage
touches.*

01

THE WRITER

Who held the pen — and why?

PAUL · HIS PAST

Once arrested Christians. It's why the early church feared him — and why he calls himself “**the worst of sinners.**”

AMOS · HIS JOB

No professional prophet — a **shepherd and fig-farmer** whom God drafted to warn a comfortable nation.

HOSEA · HIS MARRIAGE

His heartbreak over unfaithful Gomer **became his message** — Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

The most important question of all: *why is he writing?* The chronicler retells Samuel & Kings to reassure the post-exile community that God still loves them.

02 THE AUDIENCE

Most letters answer a real situation.

New Testament letters are mostly *occasional* — written into a specific crisis. Name the situation and the themes snap into focus.

MARK

Facing Nero

Likely written to Christians near Rome before persecution — so it stresses Jesus staying faithful through suffering.

COLOSSIANS

A dethroned Christ

Answers a false teaching that gave Christ a place, but not the supreme place — so Paul exalts his supremacy.

1 JOHN

Early Gnosticism

Counters a heresy denying Jesus was truly human — so John insists on the real incarnation.

03 THE ELEMENTS
The world woven into the passage.

Geo Geography & topography — the road down to Jericho, the sea, the mountains

Soc Social customs — household codes, hospitality, honor & shame

Rel Religion — Sabbath, sacrifice, Jew & Samaritan, clean & unclean

Eco Economics — the slave girl's lost profit in Acts 16

Pol Politics — Roman citizenship, Paul's rights, imperial power

LUKE 10 · THE GOOD SAMARITAN

“A man was going *down* to Jericho.”

GEOGRAPHY

You literally descend — 2,500 ft above sea level down to 700 below, across fifteen miles of rugged desert full of hiding places for robbers.

RELIGION & SOCIAL CUSTOM

Jews despised Samaritans as half-breeds. So the audience is scandalized — the respected priest and Levite pass by, and the *despised foreigner* is the hero.

The danger of the road is real, not decorative. Without the background, the punch of the parable is invisible.

LUKE 15 · THE PRODIGAL SON

The scandal of a running father.

WHAT WE READ

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and *ran* to him.” We think nothing of it.

WHAT THEY HEARD

A dignified elderly Jewish man did *not* run — it was shameful. So when the father hikes up his robes and sprints, Jesus is saying something staggering:

When a sinner turns home, God ditches his dignity and races to meet him.

The entire emotional force lives in one cultural detail.

STUDYING BACKGROUND HAS ITS OWN PITFALLS

Three dangers.

DANGER 01

Bad information

Inherited "facts" that aren't true. A great illustration isn't the same as an accurate one.

DANGER 02

Background over meaning

Spending all your time on Pharisees and tax collectors — and missing that God exalts the humble.

DANGER 03

A walking database

Collecting ancient trivia as an end in itself. Background is a tool, not a trophy.

Still — the greatest danger by far is assuming we need no background at all.

MATTHEW 19:24 · “THE EYE OF A NEEDLE”

The gate that never existed.

THE POPULAR STORY

A low gate in Jerusalem called "the needle's eye," where a camel could squeeze through on its knees with its load removed — a tidy sermon on humility.

THE TRUTH

No evidence such a gate ever existed. The eye of a needle means a *sewing needle*. Jesus paired the biggest animal with the smallest hole to say something shocking — humanly, it's *impossible*.

Your information is only as good as your sources.

TO UNDERSTAND THE WHOLE BOOK YOUR PASSAGE SITS IN

Tools for the book.

- 01 **Bible handbooks.** A quick orientation — brief intro and running commentary on each book. A good starting point.
- 02 **Introductions & surveys.** Deeper on authorship, date, audience, purpose. Introductions go technical; surveys focus on content.
- 03 **A good commentary.** Usually your best single tool — often fifty pages of background before verse one. Consult more than one.

TO UNDERSTAND THE PEOPLE, PLACES & CUSTOMS IT NAMES

Tools for the passage.

BIBLE ATLASES

Maps, sites, and geography — see where the events actually happened.

DICTIONARIES & ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Look up any topic alphabetically — "Gethsemane," "kinsman-redeemer," and more.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARIES

Verse-by-verse cultural notes. Keener for the New Testament is gold.

HISTORIES & SPECIAL STUDIES

Deep dives on ancient life — travel, hospitality, warfare, daily custom.

A caution on the open internet — convenient, but uneven. Stick with respected authors.

NOT LESS RELEVANT — MORE

The context doesn't bury the meaning. It makes it *explode with relevance*.

Does knowing "before winter" make Paul less moving — or more? Does the shame of a running father make the prodigal less powerful — or more? Every time: more. Studying background is among the most *practical* things you can do.

Discussion.

01

When has a piece of background — a place, a custom, a date — suddenly changed a passage for you?

02

Have you ever heard a "Bible background fact" from a sermon that you now wonder about, like the camel's gate?

03

Which danger is the bigger temptation for you — ignoring background entirely, or getting lost in the trivia?

TAKE IT HOME**This week's homework.**

- 01 **Read Chapter 7.** We turn the lens on ourselves—the assumptions we bring to the text. Come ready.
- 02 **Complete at least one Chapter 6 assignment.** From the book—pick a passage and dig into its background using the tools we listed tonight.
- 03 **Answer the assignment 6-6 questions for both of the books you've chosen to study during this series.**

NEXT LESSON · CHAPTER 7

The context we *bring*.

We've studied their world. Now we look in the mirror—the assumptions and experiences we carry to the text, and how to keep them from drowning out God's voice.

THANK YOU · SEE YOU NEXT WEEK