



Links Players

The Importance of Context

Now, Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then, after this, he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." (John 11:5-7, ESV)

The best golf instructors begin as disciples of other teachers. The golf swing is complex, and good teachers never stop learning.

As disciples of God's Word, having a set of tools to read and study the Bible in its original context assists us in continuing to learn. Brad Gray, Founder and Executive Director of Walking The Text, writes, "Remember, the Bible is a sophisticated piece of ancient literature, and it requires several contextual lenses to engage it well."

Brad has compiled six categories for interacting with the Bible in his e-book, "The #1 Mistake Most Everyone Makes Reading The Bible." Let's examine today's scripture passage through this framework.

Historical. The Bible writers often left out extra details that their audiences already knew, hence, why it's important for us to ask, "What was going on in the world, and why are certain events unfolding the way they described?"

Other questions: What time period are we dealing with? What is the historical setting? Lazarus' story occurs near the end of Jesus' three-year ministry. Jesus had left Judea because of a division between the Jews and the Pharisees, who wanted him dead.

Cultural. Who are the characters, and where are they from? What was good or hard for them? This category includes value systems (like honor and shame or Hellenism), tribal or agrarian societies, the Temple as the center of Jewish life, and Rabbinical teaching practices. This is much different than the culture we experience.

As the male in the family, Lazarus's illness has great consequences for Martha and Mary. Jesus's "staying two days longer" doesn't fit the community value system. After three days, a person was considered officially deceased. Curiously, Jesus came on the fourth day.

Geographical. Where does the story take place? What are the climate, geology, topography, accessibility to water and trade routes, and politics? Jesus was in the Jordan River when he heard about Lazarus. Bethany is nearly seventeen miles back up the Judean mountains near Jerusalem.

Visual. What does the place look like? Research photos or illustrations of the location of the story. Imagine what it would have been like to live there. Jesus and his disciples were in the wilderness – dry, hot, and dusty, but by the river. The road back up to Judea was harsh and dangerous.

Linguistic. The original languages matter, and they function much differently from the English language. This means every translation is an interpretation by the translator. We can trust the Bible, but we need to consider looking at multiple translations.

Literary. Literary addresses genre, design, W's (who, where, when, why), and placement. Look into the specific Hebrew and Greek words and their meanings. Lazarus' story is not a parable; it is a historical narrative. The placement of this story in John's Gospel is right before the plot to kill Jesus.

I hope you are encouraged and challenged to try contextually reading the Word. It might feel intimidating, but a little at a time will awaken more life in the Living Word.

Prayer: Lord, help me open my eyes and heart to the depth of your Word.

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Tracy Hanson

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