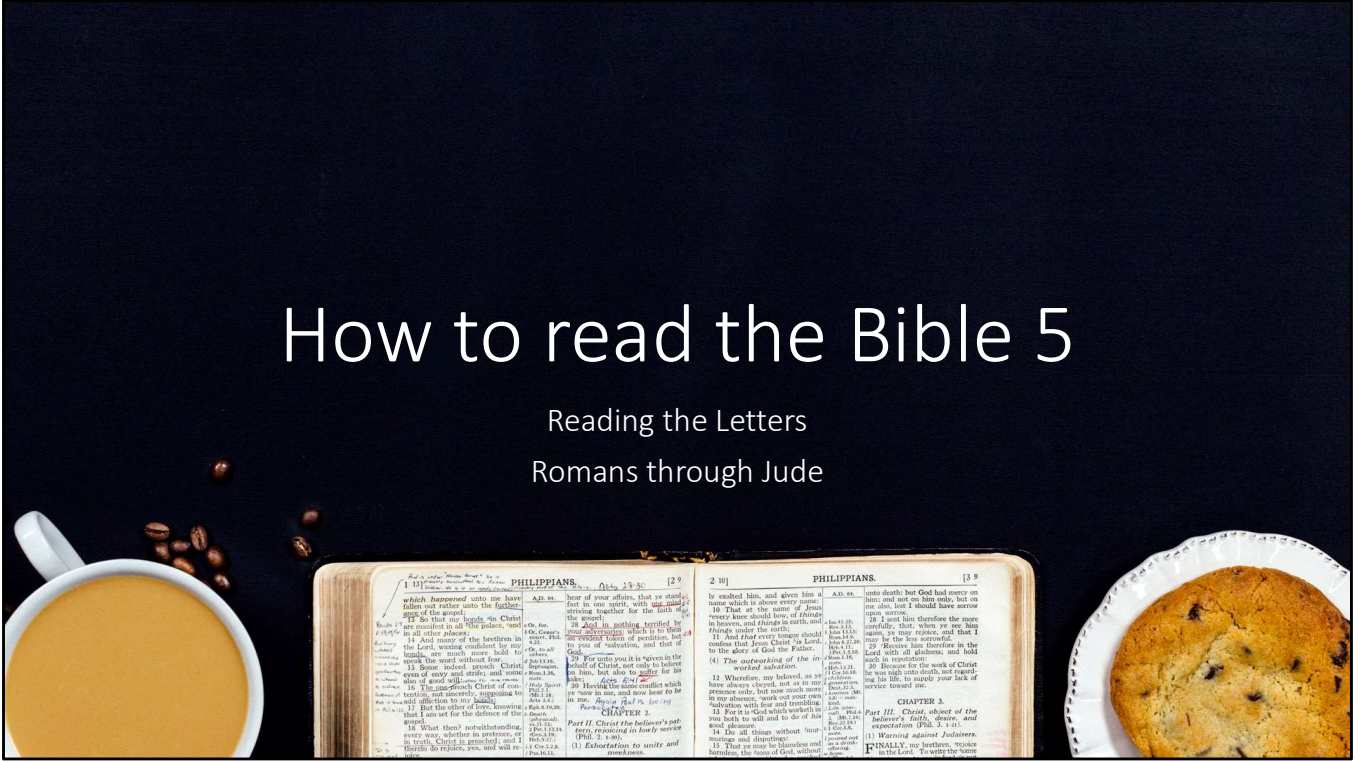
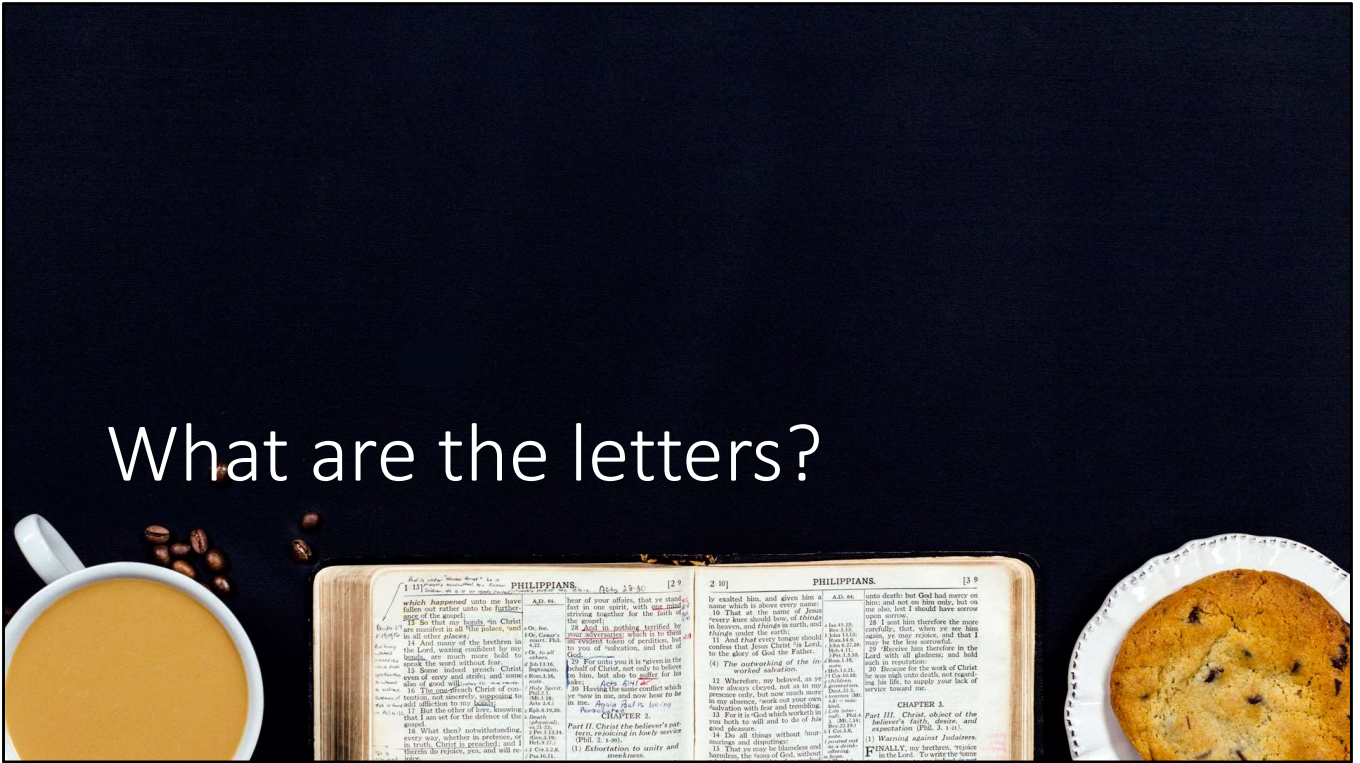


How to read the Bible 5

Reading the Letters
Romans through Jude





What are the letters?

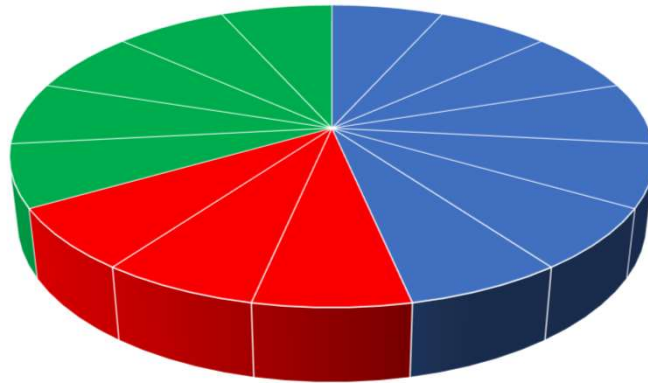
The first question we should probably address in any course on the Bible is: why read it at all? Why should some 2000 year old collection of writings (which go back three and a half thousand years) from the Middle East be worth any of our time in 21st century Australia?

The answer is simple: we have had an encounter with the risen Christ—we are Christians. And the founding Christians, who saw Christ face-to-face told us, in no uncertain terms, that Scripture—the Bible—was incredibly useful for us.



Letters are letters to churches, individuals, and ethnic groups.
This map shows the geographic range of recipients.

Recipients



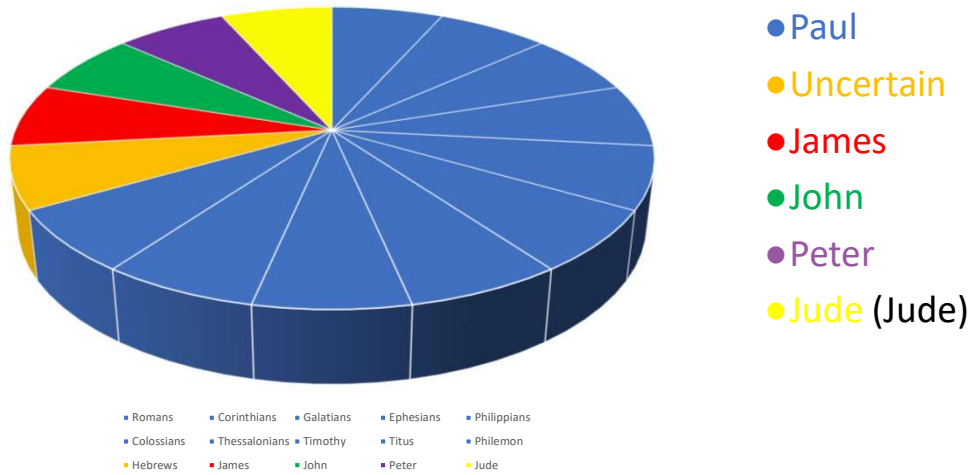
- Cities
- Individuals
- Groups

But:
All written with
distribution in mind

■ Romans ■ Corinthians ■ Galatians ■ Ephesians ■ Philippians
■ Colossians ■ Thessalonians ■ Timothy ■ Titus ■ Philemon
■ Hebrews ■ James ■ John ■ Peter ■ Jude

Recipients are important, because it helps you understand the intended scope of the letter, and to understand how to apply it today.

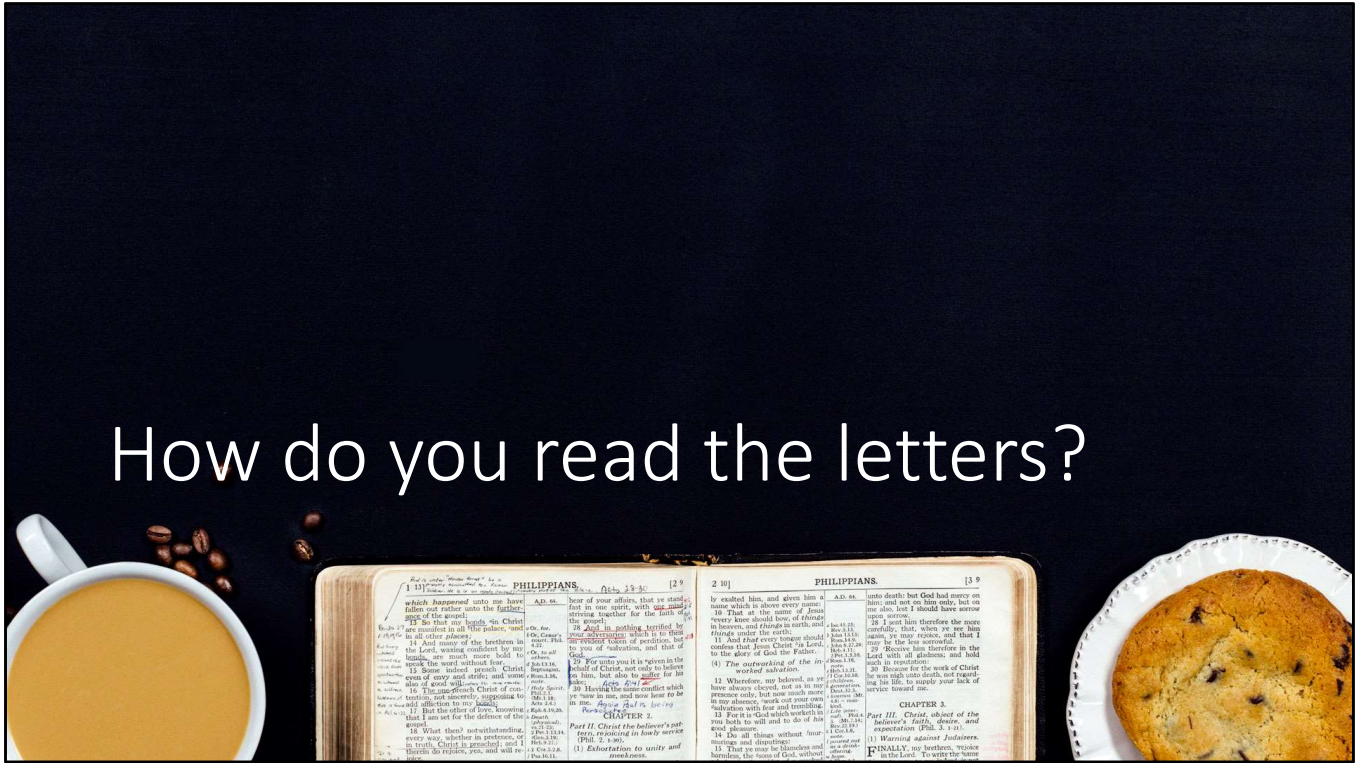
Authors



Authors are important, because different authors use language in subtly different ways, and have different emphases in their theology.

Structure

- Salutation (e.g. Eph. 1:1-2)
 - Sender
 - Recipient
 - Greeting
- Thanksgiving (e.g. Eph. 1:3-23)
- Body (e.g. Eph. 2:1-4:16)
- Commands/exhortations (e.g. Eph. 4:17-6:20)
- Closing (e.g. Eph. 6:21-24)



How do you read the letters?

The first question we should probably address in any course on the Bible is: why read it at all? Why should some 2000 year old collection of writings (which go back three and a half thousand years) from the Middle East be worth any of our time in 21st century Australia?

The answer is simple: we have had an encounter with the risen Christ—we are Christians. And the founding Christians, who saw Christ face-to-face told us, in no uncertain terms, that Scripture—the Bible—was incredibly useful for us.

Example text

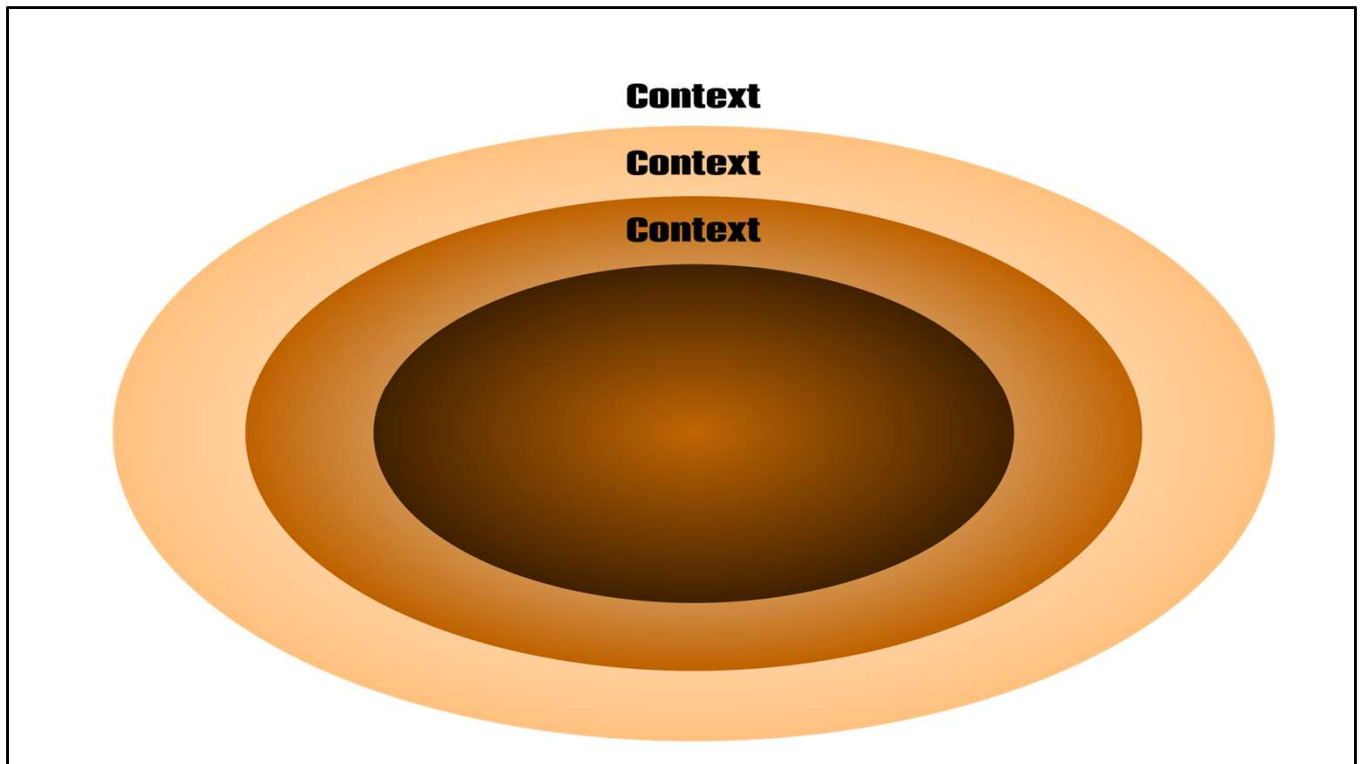
We will be interpreting the following sentence:

“Slaves, you must always obey your earthly masters.”
–Colossians 3:22a (CEV)

Ask about initial impressions of this sentence!



The adage of real estate consists of three repetitions of the same word. What is that?



Interpretation is similar:

Context

of the letter

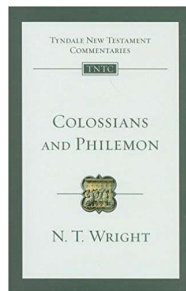
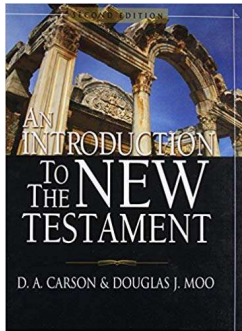
Book context

- **Biblical**
 - Where is it in the Bible?
- **Historical**
 - When was it written?
 - Who wrote it?
 - Who was it written to?
 - What was happening at the time (in the receiving and broader church, and in society in general)?
- **Logical**
 - What was it written for? (Purpose)
 - What is its structure (body -> commands or commands->body)?

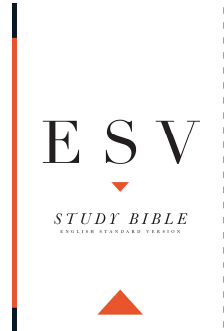
**Context
of the letter**

Finding book context

Introduction or Commentary

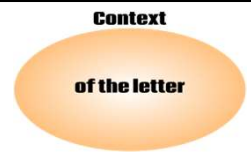


Study Bible



Check out <http://bestcommentaries.com>

Workshop: Context of Colossians



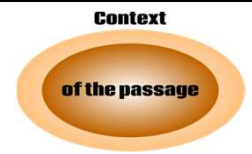
Context	Data for Colossians
Where in Bible	
When written	
Author	
Recipients	
Historical context	
Purpose	
Structure	

Context

of the letter

Workshop: Context of Colossians

Context	Data for Colossians
Where in Bible	New Testament, Paul's letters
When written	AD 61-62
Author	Paul
Recipients	Church of Colosse
Historical context	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paul in jail in Rome• Letter probably sent with Onesimus (and thus Philemon)• Colossian church planted by Epaphras struggling with false teaching with Jewish and Greek elements• Struggle over Jewish Law in church long resolved• Gnosticism yet to mature• Church not terribly persecuted at immediate time
Purpose	Counter false teaching; encourage maturity in Christ (particularly in relationships)
Structure	Body -> Commands



Passage context

- Outline the structure of the letter considering
 - Letter structure (salutation, thanksgiving, body, commands, closing)
 - Logical structure (flow of argument)
 - Rhetorical structure (claim/counter-claim, supporting evidence or anecdote, parenthetical aside, etc.)
 - Grammatical structure (sentences, paragraphs, connecting words, etc.)
- Useful to do yourself
 - Helps you understand the flow of the author's thoughts
 - But plenty of resources to help in this

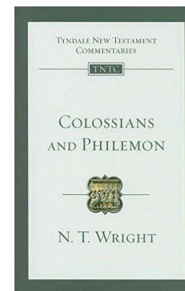
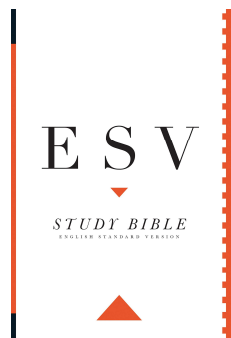
Context

of the passage

Workshop: Outline of Colossians

To find context of Colossians 3:22-25

Resources:





Workshop: Outline of Colossians

- I. Greeting (1:1–2)
- II. Thanksgiving (1:3–8)
- III. Prayer (1:9–14)
- IV. Praise to Christ (1:15–20)
 - A. Christ is Lord of creation (1:15–17)
 - B. Christ is Lord of redemption (1:18–20)
- V. Reconciliation of the Colossians to God (1:21–23)
- VI. The Apostle Paul's Labor for the Gospel (1:24–2:3)
 - A. Paul's suffering and stewardship of the mystery (1:24–28)
 - B. Paul's labor for the Colossians (1:29–2:3)
- VII. The Dangerous Teaching at Colossae (2:4–23)
 - A. Warning about a deceptive teaching (2:4–8)
 - B. Help for the danger: resources in Christ (2:9–15)
 - C. Additional warnings about the teaching (2:16–23)
- VIII. The Proper Focus: Christ and the Life Above (3:1–4)
- IX. Instructions on Living the Christian Life (3:5–4:6)
 - A. Dealing with the sins of the past (3:5–11)
 - B. Putting on the virtues of Christ (3:12–17)
 - C. Living in the Christian household (3:18–4:1)
 - D. Persistence in prayer (4:2–4)
 - E. Good behavior toward those outside the community (4:5–6)
- X. Personal Greetings and Instructions (4:7–17)
 - A. Remarks about the messengers carrying the letter (4:7–9)
 - B. Greetings from Paul's associates (4:10–14)
 - C. Greetings to the Christians in Laodicea (4:15–17)
- XI. Letter Closing (4:18)

(from ESV Study Bible)

Workshop: Outline of Colossians

1. OPENING GREETING (1:1–2)
2. INTRODUCTION OF PAUL AND HIS THEME (1:3–2:5)
 - A. Thanksgiving (1:3–8)
 - B. Prayer and meditation (1:9–23)
 - i. Paul's prayer: the knowledge of God (1:9–12a)
 - ii. Reasons for thanksgiving (1:12b–23)
 - a. The new exodus (1:12b–14)
 - b. Creation and new creation in Christ (1:15–20)
 - c. New creation in Colosse (1:21–23)
 - C. Paul's ministry and his reasons for writing (1:24–2:5)
 - i. Paul's ministry in Christ (1:24–29)
 - ii. Paul's ministry to the Colossians (2:1–5)
3. THE APPEAL FOR CHRISTIAN MATURITY (2:6–4:6)
 - A. Introduction: continue in Christ (2:6–7)
 - B. Let no-one exclude you (2:8–23)
 - i. Already complete in Christ (2:8–15)
 - a. Christ and his rivals (2:8–10)
 - b. Already circumcised in Christ (2:11–12)
 - c. Already free from the law's demands (2:13–15)
 - ii. Therefore, do not submit to Jewish regulations (2:16–23)
 - a. These things were mere preparations for Christ's new age (2:16–19)
 - b. With Christ you died to this world and its regulations (2:20–23)
 - C. Instead, live in accordance with the new age (3:1–4:6)
 - i. Live in Christ, the risen Lord (3:1–4)
 - ii. Knowledge and life renewed according to God's image (3:5–11)
 - iii. Do all in the name of the Lord Jesus (3:12–17)
 - iv. New life—at home (3:18–4:1)
 - v. New life—in the world (4:2–6)
4. FINAL GREETINGS (4:7–18)
 - A. Introduction of messengers (4:7–9)
 - B. Greetings from Paul's companions (4:10–14)
 - C. Greetings to Christians in the Colosse area (4:15–17)
 - D. Signature of the apostle (4:18)

(from N. T. Wright, Colossians and Philemon)

Context

of the passage

Workshop: Interpret Col. 3:22a

“Slaves, you must always obey your earthly masters.”
—Colossians 3:22a (CEV)

Context

of the passage

Outline for Col. 3:22a

From ESV Study Bible:

IX. Instructions on Living the Christian Life (3:5–4:6)

A. Dealing with the sins of the past (3:5–11)

B. Putting on the virtues of Christ (3:12–17)

C. **Living in the Christian household (3:18–4:1)**

From N. T. Wright's Tyndale Commentary:

3. THE APPEAL FOR CHRISTIAN MATURITY (2:6–4:6)

C. Instead, live in accordance with the new age (3:1–4:6)

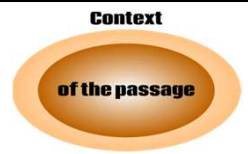
i. Live in Christ, the risen Lord (3:1–4)

ii. Knowledge and life renewed according to God's image (3:5–11)

iii. Do all in the name of the Lord Jesus (3:12–17)

iv. **New life—at home (3:18–4:1)**

Conclusions from Outline for Col. 3:22a

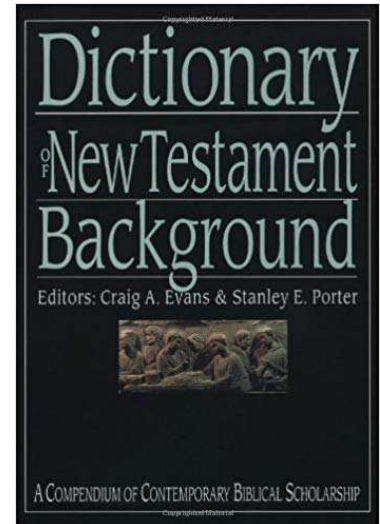


- Context is the Christian household
- Context is Christian responsibility to one another
- Context prioritises responsibility to Christ

Followup research:

- Household slaves in Roman society

Example resource: Dictionary of New Testament Background,
ed. Craig A. Evans & Stanley E. Porter



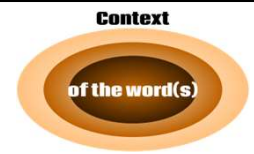
Context

of the passage

Key points on Roman Slaves

- Households in Roman times had “slaves” that lived and worked in the house and belonged to the household
- Primarily spoils of war
- Brutal punishments, despite humane ideals
- Found at all levels of society (e.g. Felix, Acts 24:22-27)
- Manumission (legal release) possible
- Industrial or agricultural slaves outside context of passage





Sentence/word context

- Look at the surrounding sentences
 - How does this sentence fit into the flow of thought for the outline?
 - How does this sentence fit into the flow of thought for this paragraph?
- Look at the sentence structure
 - What does this word do in the sentence?
- Look at the word itself
 - What part of speech is it—what does it do? (verb, noun, adjective, etc.)
 - What is its range of possible meaning, and what words could replace it (what doesn't it mean?)
 - How do the surrounding words restrict the meaning?

NOTE: for best results, either use multiple English translations, or original language tools

Note flow of interpretation continues from bigger (outline) to smaller (word)

Workshop: Interpret Col. 3:22a



“Slaves, you must always obey your earthly masters.”
—Colossians 3:22a (CEV)

Context

of the word(s)

Paragraph context for Col. 3:22a

¹⁸ Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. ¹⁹ Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. ²⁰ Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. ²¹ Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. ²² **Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters**, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. ²³ *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,* ²⁴ *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.* ²⁵ *For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*

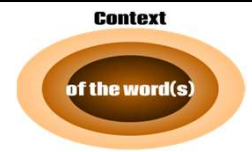
4 Masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.

—English Standard Version, Col 3:18–4:1

The bolded text shows the matching responsibilities, which is seen in the two other scenarios (husbands and wives, parents and children).

Points to note:

- The weaker party is put first, leaving the final word to the stronger party
- The responsibility on the weaker party is submission or obedience, and the stronger party is required to care for the weaker party, and treat them gently, justly, and fairly
- Only bondservants (or slaves) are given a long explanation of how and why they should fulfil their responsibilities—does this speak to Onesimus’s influence on the letter?
- While the balancing responsibilities seem to assume that both parties are Christian, verse 23 seems to indicate that it does not matter if they are not—the Christian carries their responsibility regardless



Word context for Col. 3:22a

Key words in the sentence using multiple translations:

²² **Bondservants**, **obey** in **everything** those who are your **earthly masters**,

—English Standard Version, Col 3:22a

²² **Slaves**, you must **always obey** your **earthly masters**.

—Contemporary English Version, Col 3:22a

²² **Slaves**, in **all things obey** those who are your **masters** on **earth**,

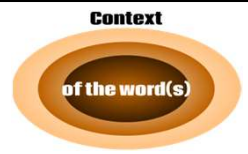
—New American Standard Bible (1995), Col 3:22a

²² **Slaves**, **obey** your **human masters** in **everything**,

—Lexham English Bible, Col 3:22a

- Note that “slaves” is translated “bondservants” in the ESV, emphasizing the type of slave as a household slave (worth checking out the Greek)
- Obey is always translated obey, not much wiggle room
- “everything” is translated as “always” and “in all things” – fairly clear meaning (Grk *panta*)
- “earthly” translated as “human”, check Greek
- Masters always same word, not much wiggle room (Grk *kyrios* often translated Lord, and referring to Christ, thus need for adjective)

Word “slave” in Col. 3:22a (using Logos)



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Next step: application

- We now understand what God said to the Colossians
- Ask following questions to apply to us:
 - Do we experience an equivalent situation to that of the Colossians?
 - How is it parallel?
 - How is it different?
 - What parts of God's message carries over (relates to the direct parallels)?
 - How are these parts changed by the change of context?
 - What parts of God's message doesn't carry over?
 - What, then is God saying to us?
- NOTE: sometimes we will not like the result!

Example application: Col. 3:22-4:1



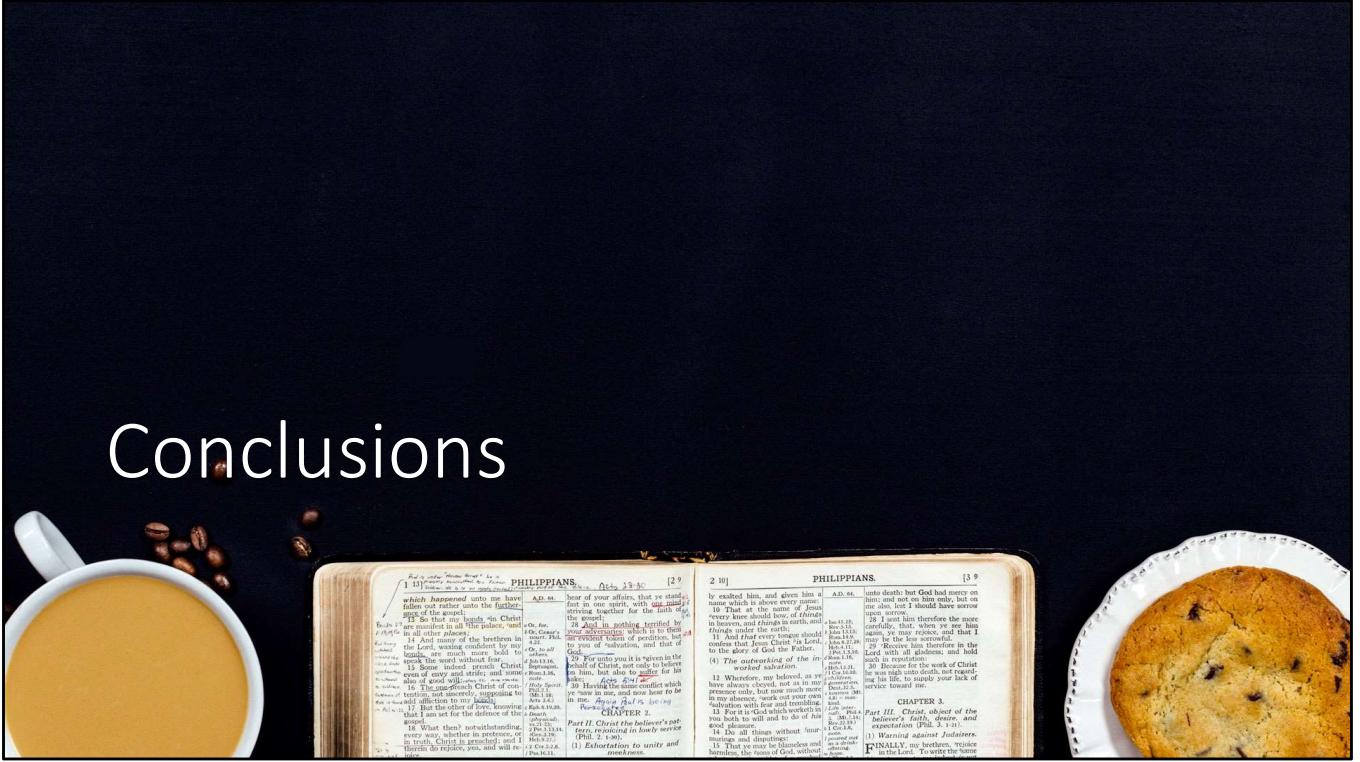
Criteria	Result
Equivalent	
Parallels	
Differences	
Carryover message	
Changes	
Not relevant	
Message for us	



Example application: Col. 3:22-4:1

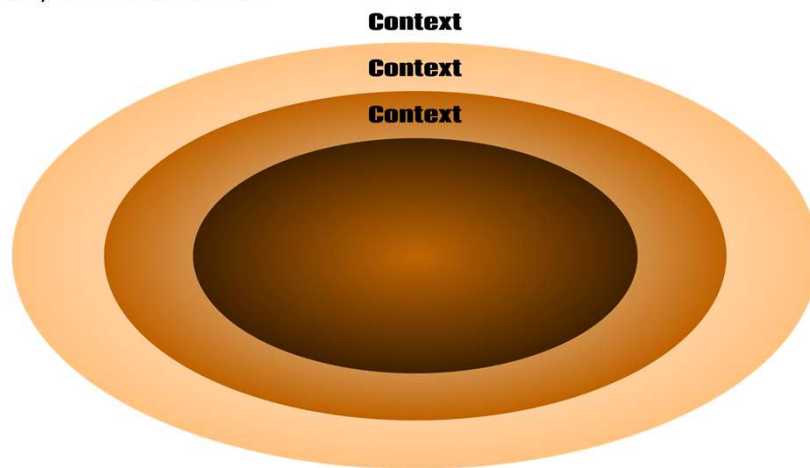
Criteria	Result
Equivalent	Workplace
Parallels	Bosses and employees, chain of command, economic support/dependence, discipline, shared goals
Differences	Workplace/worktime only (not home or own time), limited discipline, chain of command operates only at workplace, only work goals shared
Carryover message	Obey your master; be genuine in your work, not just putting on a good show; work "heartily;" work for Christ, not your human master; the ultimate reward comes from God, so work is a part of your Christian worship
Changes	Master -> boss; household (all of life) -> workplace only; potential brutal discipline -> workplace discipline; household/all of life goals -> workplace goals
Not relevant	"Everything" is constrained to workplace only; "whatever you do" is constrained to "whatever you do at work"
Message for us	Be obedient to your bosses in the workplace contexts; be genuine in your service, not just putting on a good show; work "heartily;" work for Christ, not your human boss; the ultimate reward comes from God, so work is a part of your Christian worship

Conclusions



Process

- Start broad, narrow down



Result?

- Understanding based on God's word, not our own ideas!
- Understanding respects original context
- Understand what the verse said to the original audience
 - That is, we "overhear" God speaking through Paul to the Colossians (for example)
- Application: take the message to the recipients, find equivalent situations in our world, apply same idea to our situation
 - Obey the application, especially if you don't like it, this is the process of sanctification (becoming more like Christ)