

Why History Is Important

History sounds boring and maybe even difficult at times, but you can't escape its importance. Historical context is *very* important in the Bible for certain reasons. (1) The Bible was written to an audience of people living between around 2,000 B.C. and 100 A.D. If you've never lived during that period, then the concepts, customs, and imageries in the Bible might be foreign language to you. (2) Understanding history helps us read the Bible and get more out of it. We hear the message and internalize it better. Today, we look at several such examples.

There are three main ways you can look up a passage's historical context.

- (1) Read the passage's commentary. A **commentary** is basically written by some Bible nerd and is his/her interpretation of the passage. If the commentary is good, it will include the passage's historical context. If you have a study Bible, the notes are essentially shortened commentaries. Study bibles are your cheapest bet. Really good commentaries normally come in sets of books, and one set can cost up to \$1,000 or even more. You can get around it, however, by going to academic libraries (e.g. Wheaton College, North Central, University of Chicago, etc.). Some churches have commentaries in their library. Lucky you: WCAC is one of them 😊. Some excellent commentary sets are the Pillar New Testament (PNT) series, New International Commentary of the New/Old Testament (NICNT/NICOT), and the New International Bible Commentary (NIBC). The NIBC might be the easiest to read.
- (2) Read primary sources. **Primary sources** are really awesome because they are translations of actual documents from ancient periods. Billions of primary sources exist out there, so you can either sift through all of them, or you can look in specialized books. They are important because without them, we would not know if certain contexts are true. The two that are used in beginning biblical studies classes are *Readings from the First-Century World* (Elwell, Yarbrough, 1998) and *Readings from the Ancient Near East* (Arnold, Beyer, 2002), and I recommend either of them. You should be able to borrow them from a library.
- (3) Read secondary sources. **Secondary sources** are like history textbooks and such. You can find this anywhere. A note of caution: the Internet is a great resource, but don't believe everything you read, especially in sites like Wikipedia. For the New Testament, really good secondary source is *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Ferguson, 2003). For the Old Testament, any good history about the ancient Near East will suffice.

Let's look at a few examples of this in practice.

1. Loving God and Our Neighbors.

Scripture: Mark 12: 28-34

We've gone through this passage already, so we won't dwell here much. Recall that Jesus, here, was talking about the most important law in the Bible: Loving God wholeheartedly. He also brings up loving our neighbors. Now, historically, the Jews know that loving God wholeheartedly is the most important law. Jesus was not teaching them anything new. The new part is "loving your neighbors as yourselves." Leviticus 19:11 is where that verse came from, and it was a relatively obscure verse. The revolutionary part is that loving God means you love your neighbors. If you love your neighbors, you love God.

2. Lukewarm Laodicea? What's so bad?

Scripture: Revelation 3: 14-22

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

So you read this passage, and you wonder, "Well, that can't be so bad. I drink lukewarm water all the time!" Well, here's some historical background. Laodicea is a very wealthy city. It's located in an earthquake zone, however, and in 60 A.D., a big one destroyed the entire city. The Emperor Nero offered federal aid to restore the city, but the city declined and rebuilt it using their own money! That's how rich they are!

Like many cities in the Roman Empire, Laodicea is blessed with an aqueduct that carries drinking water from either the hot springs or mountain streams to the middle of the city, which is why many of such cities (if they exist today) have fountains all over the place. Laodicea's aqueduct carries hot mineral water from 5 miles away. By the time it reached the city, however, it has become quite lukewarm. That might not have been so bad, except the water tastes like someone has put iron flakes into it. It's drinkable, but very hard.

So what might Jesus be saying to the Laodicean Christians?

3. The Parable of the Good Terrorist.

Scripture: Luke 10: 25-37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'^[a]; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[b]" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

So maybe you're wondering what the big deal is with the Samaritans. Okay, so it's like white people and black people—they don't get along, right? Well, let's look into this a little bit more. Maybe it would help if we retold the story as such:

Jesus told this story: "A man was going from downtown [Chicago] to the South Side when a bunch of gangsters took everything away from him and beat him up. They left him along the side of a dumpster in some dark alley. Pastor _____ saw this from a distance, and crossed the road so he could avoid the poor guy in the dark alley. Billy Graham also saw this from a distance, and he looked away so he wouldn't have to help him. After that, Osama bin Laden comes and helps the poor man. He brings him to a Hampton Inn a few miles up in the middle of downtown and tells the receptionist, "Take care of him. If you need to buy stuff from Walgreen's, let me know and I'll pay you back when I return."

"Now," asked Jesus, "Which of these three would the guy say is his neighbor?"

"The third guy," replied the audience.

The Samaritans were considered heretics and dirty people. You just don't associate with them. They were descendants of wayward Jews who had kids with pagan women. Leave them alone.

What is the message that Jesus was trying to get across?

4. The Prayer of Jabez

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 4: 9-10

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, “I gave birth to him in pain.” Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, “Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” And God granted his request.

Many of you have probably heard of Bruce Wilkinson’s famous book, *The Prayer of Jabez*. At first glance, you might think, “Hey, what an awesome prayer! Maybe I’ll pray that prayer so God can bless me and enlarge my territory!” Well, hold on now. Let’s look at the historical importance of names and land.

If you notice, in the Old Testament, names are really important because it tells others about yourself. Thus, God has many, many names because there are way many ways to describe Him. Jabez’s name is “pain”. Awesome name. Some scholars suggest that the reason for the name was that Jabez did not have a father (i.e. his mother was not married). This is a big shameful act in Hebrew days. Thus, his birth was not a happy time in his mother’s life. It was, rather, the opposite.

Likewise, in the Old Testament, money was not really invented. The sign of wealth is not how much money you have, but how much land you own. The king, being the wealthiest, owns most of the land of the country. If Old Testament scholars are correct and Jabez was an illegitimate son, they probably did not have much land, if any.

What exactly is Jabez asking for? Why did he pray that prayer?