

IDENTIFYING WORD PICTURES

Track 1 – Do We Really Need a Context?

Introduction

In our contemporary culture, we've all gotten used to texting, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook posts and all of those things that provide "instant communication". We have come to value brevity: short messages, short videos and shorter sermons. As a result, our culture often sacrifices the ability to think more deeply about *ideas and beliefs which require more context*. Most texts and messaging don't require much thought because those texts have almost no content (or are simply opinions). If you want to understand how to work on a car engine or bake a cake, however, you'll need each step explained, and those steps need to be heard or read *together, in context*, in order to make sense and allow you to succeed. Literature in general, and the Bible in particular, works the same way. If you take one part of what you read and assign it a meaning, it will often leave you *clueless* with regard to the real meaning the *author* was trying to communicate.

As an illustration of the importance of *context*, take a look at this song from the 1980s:

Burning Down the House

Watch out, you might get what you're after
Cool babies, strange but not a stranger
I am an ordinary guy
Burning down the house

Hold tight, wait 'til the party's over
Hold tight, we're in for nasty weather
There has got to be a way
Burning down the house

Here's your ticket, pack your bags
Time for jumpin' overboard
Transportation is here
Close enough but not too far,
Maybe you know where you are
Fightin' fire with fire

All wet, hey, you might need a raincoat
Shakedown, dreams walking in broad daylight
Three hundred sixty-five degrees
Burning down the house

It was once upon a place,
Sometimes I listen to myself
Gonna come in first place
People on their way to work,
Say, "Baby, what did you expect?"
Gonna burst into flame

Burning down the house

My house's out of the ordinary
That's right, don't want to hurt nobody

Some things sure can sweep me off my feet
 Burning down the house
 No visible means of support
 And you have not seen nothin' yet
 Everything's stuck together
 Now I don't know what you expect
 Stare right into the TV set
 Fighting fire with fire¹

So, What is This Song Trying to Tell Us?

You don't have to read very many lines of this song before you realize that it has no message; *that's* their point. It's "meaningless". The people who wrote this song were looking to promote post-modernism.² They were trying to promote the idea that nothing inherently "means" anything. The name of the group, as a matter of fact, was the *Talking Heads*, and one of their albums was named "Stop Making Sense". Their *goal*, therefore, was to give you nonsense, and I would say that they succeeded!

Why on earth would I take the time to share a song like this with you during a serious study of the Bible? I obviously don't share their philosophy... But because of our cultural tendency to want brevity, and perhaps our short attention spans, we'll pull one or two lines out of a song like this and think we understand it; we don't really care or take the time to think about the meaning as a whole.

Has this "short-circuiting" of the meaning been carried into the church? Absolutely. Consider how preachers and teachers often build their sermons, and were taught to do so... If you can imagine with me that the lines in the song above were verses in the Bible, let's take the line "My house's out of the ordinary". The sentence on its own makes sense and can be understood. Preachers are often taught that to help the congregation remember *their* points, alliteration is a helpful tool. Using that technique, here is a possible outline:

- My house is *Uncommon*.
- My house is *Unparalleled*.
- My house is *Unique*.

And with that as their outline, they are free to tell stories and be creative around each of those points. The preacher's goal, of course, would be to make as clear as possible how extraordinary "my house" is. While there is nothing necessarily wrong with that goal, the result is still the same: when people walk away, they would still have no idea what the *author* was trying to say! (And we would only really understand that the *authors'* goal was nonsense by considering the whole song.)

When it comes to the Bible, the consequences could not be more serious. People typically hear a teacher or preacher for 30-40 minutes per week in a sermon or in a Bible study. If they aren't given adequate context, they will leave the building with no better understanding of the Author than when they walked in. Are we okay with that?

¹ Songwriters: David Byrne, Tina Weymouth, Jerry Harrison, Chris Frantz. For non-commercial use only.

² Post-modernism is a philosophical view that proposes we have no real way to access *truth, knowledge or meaning*. It is effectively a "thorough agnosticism," and would say that we don't have a way to know whether anything we think is either true or false.

In contrast to the first song, let's look at another song which actually tries to communicate a meaning, and also illustrates the importance of *context*:

Into the West

Lay down
Your sweet and weary head
Night is falling
You have come to journey's end
Sleep now
And dream of the ones who came before
They are calling
From across the distant shore

Why do you weep?
What are these tears upon your face?
Soon you will see
All of your fears will pass away
Safe in my arms
You're only sleeping

What can you see on the horizon?
Why do the white gulls call?
Across the sea
A pale moon rises
The ships have come to carry you home

And all will turn
To silver glass
A light on the water
All souls pass

Hope fades
Into the world of night
Through shadows falling
Out of memory and time
Don't say, "We have come now to the end"
White shores are calling
You and I will meet again

And you'll be here in my arms
Just sleeping

What can you see on the horizon?
Why do the white gulls call?
Across the sea
A pale moon rises
The ships have come to carry you home

And all will turn
To silver glass
A light on the water

Grey ships pass
Into the West³

So, What is THIS Song Trying to Tell Us?

I think you can easily understand that this song is creating a picture for us, a picture that can only be “seen” when we read/hear the whole song. Given the whole song, we have enough context to know what the author is trying to communicate. The interesting thing about this song is what it communicates “between the lines”; that makes the context even more important.

This song, on the surface, tells us the story of two people who have been on a long trip in order to arrive at the ocean. There they will part ways, and one of them will go on a voyage to another place. There is sadness as they wait for the ships to take one of them, but also encouragement that the second person will follow at some point. This is what we see on the surface, and if we saw *parts* of the story in isolation, we would probably think that was *all* it communicated...

But through the lines of the song, because of the particular words that are used and the order of events, almost everyone I share this with tells me they understand the same *meaning*: this is about someone who is *dying*. After the journey through life, they have come close to death and are sad that they are dying. They will be “passing” into the next life. The other person tries to encourage the one who is dying by telling them that they “will meet again” in the next life. But we would only see/hear and understand that *when we see the whole picture and make sense of the parts*. Can you tell I think these are very creative lyrics?

So What?

If you take the time to look at the *whole picture*, you bring a lot more to the table than you might have thought! If you read enough of the *context* and see *all the parts of the picture*, you will be able to dismiss ideas that don’t make sense. Our minds were created to be able to imagine, and we naturally create a consistent picture if we “connect enough of the dots”. And many times, it doesn’t require too many dots to make it all fit together. Our minds naturally do the work, if we’ll take the time.

As one last illustration of your mind creating the picture, read the following paragraph:

When I was walking down the street the other day, I saw one of my friends walking toward me. There was a really large dog nearby. As my friend walked toward me, so did the dog. Right when I went to shake my friend’s hand, he bit me!

Believe it or not, this has a lot to do with Bible interpretation⁴... While some might try to argue that the last “he” in the paragraph points back to his friend, we know better, right? We know better because we “see” the picture, and we know that the large dog would be a *far* more likely candidate for biting!

³ Songwriters: Annie Lennox. For non-commercial use only.

⁴ All of the examples in this lesson involve the linguistic concepts of *cohesion* and *coherence*. *Cohesion* involves the grammatical and lexical relationships between different elements of a text that hold it together: pronouns, transitions, noun repetition, verb tense relationships, etc. *Coherence* involves making sense of the text as a whole at an ideas level.

While I could give many biblical examples of word pictures and how God helps us understand His word by “seeing” them, hey, that’s what this course is about, so you’ll just have to wait! I hope that at this point, however, that I’ve made a sufficient case for the importance of context if we hope to be able to “see” the pictures that God is painting for us. If you’ll take the time to go with me, your minds will do the rest!

One of the wonderful things that God did when He gave us the Bible was to *help* us understand what He wants us to know through the use of word pictures. And in many places in the New Testament, when what He wanted to reveal was difficult to understand, He gave us *multiple pictures together* for us to put together to help us “see” the pictures correctly; those will be the focus of this course.⁵ If the pictures line up when seen together, we can be sure that we understand what God is telling us and that our interpretation is sound.

Why are several word pictures *in a row* so important? When we’re given information that we’re not familiar with or that contradicts our assumptions, a single word picture might not be enough to explain what is *meant*; as a matter of fact, it might make things more confusing. Haven’t you found yourself saying to someone, “*You didn’t understand what I meant; let me give you another example*”? By giving at least three pictures/images *together*, our minds look to find the common elements and to make sense of the overall ideas. Jesus and Paul were amazing teachers as they used this technique on many occasions, not just to help their “friendly” audiences understand, but to confront those whose ideas needed to be “straightened out”!

Goals and Plan for the Course

What we’re hoping to accomplish through this set of classes includes the following goals:

- To help you identify word pictures in the New Testament,
- To give you tools to help interpret those word pictures,
- To give you practice in putting word pictures together to help you interpret, and
- To show you how God uses, through the biblical authors, multiple word pictures to help us understand and clarify what He is telling us

Moving forward from today, here is the course plan as we seek to accomplish those goals:

- Track 2 – Tools for helping us understand word pictures
- Tracks 3-4 – The 7 Kingdom word pictures in Matthew 13
- Tracks 5-6 – The 3 Kingdom word pictures in Matthew 21-22
- Tracks 7-9 – The 3 Kingdom word pictures in Matthew 24-25
- Track 10 – The 3 word pictures of the Law in Galatians 3-4
- Track 11 – The 3 word pictures of the Church in Ephesians 2
- Track 12 – The 7 word pictures of the Citizens in Revelation 2-3

For discussion: what word pictures, apart from the ones listed above, can you think of from your reading of the New Testament?

⁵ And while you may have noticed that this lesson has no actual Bible discussion in it, you can trust me when I say that this will be the *ONLY* lesson you can say that about...