

## Keeping the Big Picture in Sight

When we study the Bible in groups we often focus on a specific passage and don't look at much else. Context takes a back seat. (This is one of the big problems with the Swedish Method.) To show how distorted this makes our understanding of the passage we did the following Bible study:

### Getting started

1. Think of a time when someone trusted you with something.  
(a) What was it?

(b) Why did they trust you?

### Bible

It is easy to say we trust the Bible as the word of God but what if we come across a verse in the Bible that tells us to change our lifestyle? Do we trust that verse enough to actually make the change? Maybe we have misinterpreted the verse. Maybe we have taken it out of context. Maybe it applies to an ancient culture but it is irrelevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century life. How do we get from reading a verse in the Bible to understanding it and applying it in our lives and trusting that we are doing what God wants us to do? Let's see how we go by starting with a specific verse and working through those issues.

For the purpose of this exercise I would like us to follow 2 rules:

1. **Don't** use your Bible. Not yet anyway. I would like you to look at this one verse without looking it up in your Bibles. I'm not going to give you the Bible reference though you may guess where it is from. So put your Bibles away.
2. When we come to any verse in the Bible we come with our own life experiences, our own background, our own feelings and our own stuff we have learnt in the past about the Bible and it affects how we interpret the verse. For this next question only, I would like you to try to ignore that "baggage" and say what you think the verse means. Later we will include our baggage and see if that makes any difference to how we interpret the verse.

The verse is: "He has taken me to the banquet hall, and his banner over me is love." (Hand out copies of this verse to everyone.)

2. By considering this one verse what do you think it means?

3. Now I want you to allow all that "baggage" to come to bear on what you think this verse might mean. For example, part of my baggage is that I spent 2 years going to Leura Baptist Church where we sang lots of choruses and one of those choruses, which I got thoroughly sick of, was this one: (Play HIS BANNER OVER ME IS LOVE.)

It may not make any difference to your answer in question 2 but this time let your baggage influence what you think the verse means.

4. How would you get a better idea of what the verse means?

5. We will look at a little bit of the Biblical context by looking at the verse **before** our chosen verse and see if that changes what we think it means.

The previous verse is: "Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my lover among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste." (Hand out copies of this verse to everyone.)

(a) What does this verse tell you about the original verse?

(b) Has this verse altered what you thought the original verse meant?

If so, (i) what changed your mind?

(ii) what do you think the original verse means now?

6. What would you do now to get a better understanding of the original verse?

7. (a) Can you think of any reasons why going straight to commentaries might not be a good thing in trying to understand a particular verse?

(b) What good are commentaries?

8. What would you do now to get some personal application from the original verse?

### To finish

9. What factors are involved when we decide to trust someone?

10. If we are going to trust the meaning of a verse in the Bible what other things do we need to put our trust in?

## Big picture

What is the big picture? Not just the verse *before* the one we are focussing on. What about the whole chapter? the whole book? the whole Bible?

As we are studying the Bible we need to keep oscillating between the specific verses of the Bible and where these verses fit in with the rest of the book we are studying and where that fits in with the whole Bible. We also need to consider the historical, cultural and geographical contexts. So that's the "big picture" we need to keep in sight but there is another big picture.

If we are studying in a group we need to consider the people in the group i.e. the "baggage" they carry into the group and how it will affect how they understand the verses being studied, how people will react to other personalities and what they say and how they say it, how people fit in with the rest of the group, how the verses may come to bear on their life outside the group, and, biggest of all, how they see their role in the cosmos! There are a lot of things to think about, hence the term, "big picture".