

17. How to study the Bible alone *Part 1*

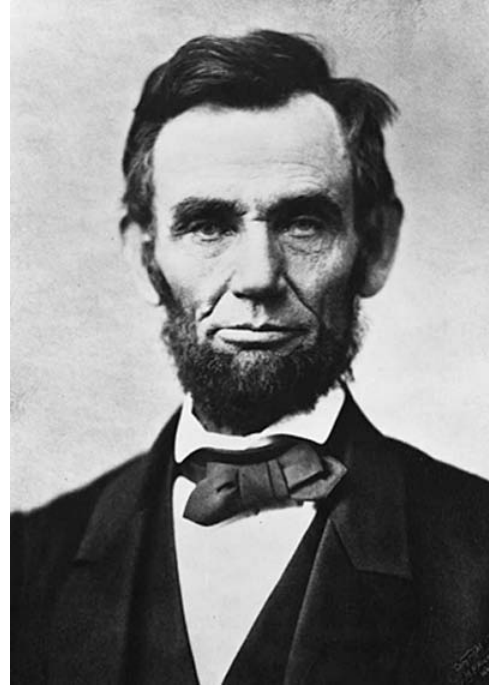
2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Since it says that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, we really need to know how to study the Word of God properly.

An American President once said he would rather live in Russia than in America. Which President would make such a remark? I know what y'all are thinking. No, it is not him. To your surprise, it was said by the Great Emancipator himself, Abraham Lincoln.

Of course, he was quoted out of context. He actually said, "I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty - to Russia, for instance." Lincoln wrote these words while he feared that many wanted to change "all men are created equal" to "all men are created equal, except non-whites."

Taking verses out of context from the Bible happens all too frequently. As I have said this many times before that all the cults use the Bible out of context to give more creditability to their demonic religions.



A. ONE RULE TO STUDY THE BIBLE WITH CONFIDENCE

This particular basic rule of Bible study should stand above all others - the law of context. Equipped with this one simple basic principle, you can begin immediately to spend a lifetime searching and discovering the treasures in the Bible.

With the law of context, there are four basic ways to keep Scripture in context:

1) Context of Immediate Setting

Behind every verse of Scripture is an immediate setting. This provides clues as to what the Lord has in mind. Once that main idea is identified, it becomes the key to opening up the meaning of the text in question.

To discover the flow of ideas streaming through a passage, good Bible students become childlike and - at the same time scientific - in asking a lot of questions:

- Who is the author?
- Why?
- Where?
- To whom is he writing?
- When?
- How?

Careful Bible students don't assume that the Lord is saying what they think He is saying, until they have done their homework. They don't try to plant an idea in "unworked ground." They dig and turn over the soil of the biblical ground until they discover the growing, living and life-changing ideas that God has planted inside of Scriptures.

Let's look at a couple of examples of specific texts whose immediate contexts have been ignored.

MISQUOTE #1: "The Bible says that if you confess your sins you'll be saved."

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

This familiar verse is often quoted as a formula for salvation. But with the presence of the Scripture we in the immediate context makes it clear that John was not addressing the unsaved. Rather, he was talking to people who were already believers in Christ within context of v6, 7, 8 and 10. And he was showing them how to be restored to a right family relationship with God who had saved them.

If we don't consider the immediate context, we might conclude that we are saved by admitting our sins rather than by believing the Gospel of Christ.

MISQUOTE #2: "The Bible says that it's wrong to wear jewelry."

1 Peter 3:3 Do not let your adornment be merely outward--arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel--

Some have used these words to say that godly women should not style their hair, use cosmetics or wear jewelry. But if we read on, we find the true meaning in context,

1 Peter 3:4 rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.

By these additional words we see that the apostle's main purpose was not to tell women that they either should or should not style their hair or wear jewelry or make herself look like an unmade bed. He was saying that they should focus on the beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit rather than relying on outward appearance. Just don't overdo like this woman. >>



MISQUOTE #3: "The Bible says that I can do anything with God's strength."

Philippians 4:13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

This optimistic verse is often taken to mean that if our faith is strong enough we can do anything we set our mind to do. But the immediate setting in which Paul said this is important. The apostle was talking specifically about his ability to live by God's strength in times of great poverty as well as in times of plenty.

Paul wanted us to know that the person whose confidence is in God who supplies strength to the person so that he can live and thrive in all kinds of situations.

2) Context of plain and normal meaning

The second rule of context says that the language of the Bible can be taken at face value. The Word of God does not have to be decoded to find deeper and hidden

meanings. When studied and interpreted in context, the Holy Spirit says what He means and means what He says. That is why our children can understand the Word of God often faster and better than us.

Let's make an example here as well:

Y'all remember prophet Balaam who had some serious conversation with his donkey in Numbers 22, do you not?

According to this familiar incident, the donkey saw the angel of the Lord with a drawn sword in the middle of the road while her disobedient master Balaam was totally clueless. When the donkey refused to go ahead, Balaam started to strike the donkey.

Numbers 22:28-30 Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" 29 And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!" 30 So the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden, ever since I became yours, to this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you?" And he said, "No."

I'd love to be there to watch this greedy, disobedient prophet being rebuked by a donkey. I bet Balaam felt like a donkey.

Normally donkeys cannot carry conversation with humans; some say this is simply a parable meant to show that even dumb animals sometimes make more sense than their human masters. They say that the talking donkey depicts how our own stubborn thoughts can be around and talk back to us. And the crushed foot of Balaam represents the physical pain we often incur in the process of acting against our own conscience. These people sure have a wild imagination.

This kind of off-the-wall spiritualized interpretation is known as 'allegorical interpretation'. There should be no place for any allegorical interpretation in Bible study.

This incident was not a parable, but an actual event. Why is it so difficult for people to believe that God who created the heavens and earth in the beginning was able to make a donkey to speak in a human voice? The plain, normal language of the text calls for us to interpret it as a real historical event.

3) Context of the Bible as a whole

A third rule of contextual interpretation is to consider the verse in its relation to the whole Bible. Because the 39 Books of the Old Testament and the 27 Books of the New Testament are in a way 'chapters' of one Book - the Bible. Those who want to live by the whole counsel of God need increasingly to be able to see each individual part in light of the whole.

The best way to interpret the Bible is using the Bible.

The many perspectives of the whole Bible cannot be quickly mastered. Gathering and combining the insights of the whole Bible is the process of a lifetime. This is one reason the Bible says that God gives pastors and Bible teachers to His people. Those who know more than the majority of believers do about the Bible can help them to balance their understanding of individual passages with complementing perspectives.

Please allow me to make an example here:

The Lord Himself showed how important it is to be able to see one passage in light of another. On the occasion of His temptation in the wilderness, He skillfully quoted from the Old Testament to offset the devil's own use of Scripture.

Matthew 4:5-7 Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

By quoting what Moses had said in Deuteronomy 6:16, Jesus indicated that it was not right for a man to willfully put God to the test. Something Moses wrote as many as 1,500 years earlier allowed Jesus to show that it is not our right to arrange circumstances in such a way as to attempt to force God's hand of provision.

4) Context of Foundational Truths

This fourth rule of context, like the third, calls for a wide view of Scripture. There are some basic, foundational truths in Scripture that we need to understand first to get a better interpretation of many individual verses.

o **Law:** Generally, it refers to the commandments of Moses. In a broader sense, law that mentioned in the Bible is any statement that describes the high standards of God. Some of these are social as well as moral. However, some of these laws do not apply to us directly due to what the Lord Jesus had done on the cross or they are laws of animal sacrifice for the Hebrew priests.

- **Grace:** The grace of God to anyone who comes to the Savior and Lord Jesus is a system of mercy and undeserved help that allows them to be accepted by God. It is not mercy of God that saves a person, nor the love of God that rescues the spiritually dying person from one way to hell. It is the grace of God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross alone. God's good response to our repentance comes from His grace, not from justice.

- **Justification:** Justification is the legal act by which God declares righteous all who trust His Son for salvation. The only thing we can do to qualify for this status is to believe in Christ.

- **Sanctification:** Sanctification is the process by which God continues to set apart and distinguish those who have believed in His Son. He doesn't make us to be set apart by His brute force; rather He continuously gives us choices to be godly in our lives.

- **Israel:** Israel is a nation of Hebrews that can trace their ethnic background back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. God made specific covenant with her and no one can destroy her permanently. Israel is the nation that will be in the center of world events in the last days.

- **The Church:** The church is also known as the Body of Jesus Christ, the Bride of Jesus Christ, not a building. It has no single ethnic identification. It is made up of men and women of every nation who confess Christ as Savior and Lord. Beginning at Pentecost, the church will remain on earth until she is removed in an event called 'the rapture'.

• **The Rapture:** The rapture can happen at any moment and ABSOLUTELY NO ONE KNOWS. There is not one single prophecy which must be fulfilled before it happens. Christ will come down TOWARD the earth, but not touching down. The trumpet call of God will raise the dead believer of Jesus Christ from their death physically; then we who are the believers of Jesus will be caught up together with them and Jesus in the air and head back to heaven. After the rapture, seven year of the Great Tribulation will happen on earth.

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

If you don't have a clear understanding of this Pre-Tribulation theology, your end-times theology which is known as eschatology will be in a great confusion.

• **The Second Coming:** The Second Coming of Jesus Christ will happen at the end of the Great Tribulation. At this time, Jesus will not come down to earth as a babe in a manger, rather as the Conqueror against satan, his demons, the Antichrist and unbelievers on the earth. It is the time for the Lord to judge them with His holiness and righteousness.

B. FOUR ESSENTIALS FOR FINDING TRUTH IN CONTEXT

While interpreting the Bible according to the rule of context, there are some timeless considerations that need to be kept in mind.

1) Dependence On God

The author of Psalm 119 reminded us of the role God can have in our Bible study.

Psalm 119:18 Open my eyes, that I may see Wondrous things from Your law.

His confidence in God's ability to help is similar to what the apostle Paul expressed:

2 Timothy 2:7 Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things.

2) A Good Conscience

A bad conscience creates a conflict of interest for the Bible student. Those with unconfessed sin, in order to justify one's own sin, he or she would ignore the truth and twist its interpretation.

Matthew 5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.

3) Self-study

Acts 17:11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

The people of Berea are an example for all of us. They searched the Scriptures to make sure that what the apostle Paul was telling them was true. Without personal involvement, the Scriptures remain second-hand, pre-digested and subject to the accuracy of the teacher.

4) Use Of Gifted Teachers

2 Peter 1:12-13 For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth. 13 Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you

Along with self-study, gifted Bible teachers can provide a depth and breadth of contextual knowledge. They provide orientation for new believers and reminders to those who are mature.