

Never Read a BIBLE VERSE

"The Most Important Thing I Could Ever Teach You!"

"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

"You hold to my teaching, you are real disciples. 32 Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."

15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called into peace. And be thankful.

Stand to Reason Radio Host & Author

Gregory Koukl

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B I B L E V E R S E

“The Most Important Thing I Could Ever Teach You”

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If there was one bit of wisdom, one rule of thumb, one single skill I could impart, one useful tip I could leave that would serve you well the rest of your life, what would it be? What is the single most important practical skill I’ve ever learned as a Christian? Never read a Bible verse. That’s right, never read a Bible verse. Instead, always read a paragraph (at least) if you want to unlock the meaning of a passage.

Think of it this way. When you stumble into the middle of a conversation and you hear a phrase or a sentence that piques your curiosity, what’s your next question? You ask, “What are you talking about?” You want the context so you can make sense of the conversation and benefit from it.

This works because of a basic rule of all communication: Meaning always flows from the top down, from the larger units to the smaller units, not the other way around. The key to the meaning of any verse comes from the paragraph, not just from the individual words.

The same is true when we stumble into the middle of a Bible passage. We can’t know what God is talking about by looking at an isolated sentence or phrase. We must consider the bigger picture.¹

My Radio “Trick”

When I’m on the radio, I use this simple rule—Never read a Bible verse—to help me answer the majority of Bible questions I’m asked, even when I’m unfamiliar with the verse. It’s an amazingly effective technique you can use, too.

I read the paragraph, not just the verse. I take stock of the relevant material above and below the reference I’m focusing on. Since the context frames the verse and gives it specific meaning, I let it tell me what’s going on.

The numbers in front of the sentences in your Bible give the illusion the verses stand alone in their meaning. Verse numbers were not in the originals, though. They were added hundreds of years later. As a result, chapter and verse breaks sometimes pop up in unfortunate places, separating relevant material that should be grouped together.

Here’s how you employ the simple rule, Never read a Bible verse.² First, ignore the verse numbers and try to get the big picture by looking at the larger unit. Then begin to narrow your focus. It’s not very hard or time consuming. It takes only a few moments and a careful reading of the text.

It works like this. Begin with the broad context of the book. What type of literature is it—history, poetry, proverb? Different genres require different approaches. What is the general meaning of the passage? What idea is being developed?

Stand back from the verse and look for breaks in the text that identify major units of thought. Ask, “What in this paragraph or group of paragraphs gives any clue to the meaning of the verse in question?”

There is a reason this little exercise is so important. Words have different meanings in different contexts (that’s what makes puns work).

When we consider a verse in isolation, one meaning may occur to us. But how do we know it's the right one? Help won't come from the dictionary. Dictionaries only complicate the issue, giving us more choices, not fewer. Help must come from somewhere else, but it's not very far away. It comes from the surrounding paragraph.

With the larger context now in view, you can narrow your focus and speculate on the meaning of the verse itself. The key at this point is to sum up the passage in your own words based on your analysis—your careful observation, research, and study—and then employ what I call the “paraphrase principle.” It's an incredibly simple way to find out if your interpretation is in the running.

Here's how it works. Just replace the text in question with your paraphrase and see if the passage still makes sense in light of the larger context. Does it dovetail naturally with the bigger picture?

This technique will immediately weed out interpretations that are obviously erroneous. Remember, an interpretation is your ability to say essentially the same thing as the author, but in your own words.

Here is an excellent example of how the paraphrase principle can effectively clear up a common misunderstanding.

A “Spirit of Fear”

In 2 Timothy 1:7 we read, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (KJV). Some have taken this to mean that whenever a believer feels fear, it is the result of a demonic spirit that needs to be resisted, bound, or even cast out.

The word “spirit,” though, is equivocal; it is open to more than one interpretation because it has more than one meaning. It could refer to an immaterial, spiritual person—a demon, an angel, the Holy Spirit, a human soul, etc. (e.g., Luke 4:33, Acts 16:16), which is the sense taken in the interpretation above. However, “spirit” could also mean a disposition, frame of mind, mood, or defining characteristic. In 1 Corinthians 4:21, Paul talks about dealing with the errant Corinthians either “with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness” (see also Galatians 6:1, Romans 8:15).³

What sense of the word does Paul have in mind when writing to Timothy? The paraphrase principle comes handily to our rescue.

Here's our paraphrase of the first option: “For God hath not given

us the demonic spirit of fear; but a demonic spirit [an angelic spirit?] of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” This seems odd. Does the Bible teach that the qualities of power, love, and a sound mind are the result of spiritual beings that influence or have power over us, or are they virtuous dispositions we develop and possess?

Let’s try the alternate meaning: “For God hath not given us a timid and fearful disposition; but a disposition of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” This makes much more sense, especially when you consider the larger context (remember, “Never read a Bible verse”), which includes Paul’s admonition that Timothy rekindle his spiritual gift (v. 6), not being ashamed of the “testimony of our Lord” (v. 8). This is why the NASB renders the verse unambiguously: “For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline.”⁴

Let me give you some other examples.

Jesus, the Uncreated Creator

In John 1:1 the writer states plainly that “the Word was God.” In verse three he provides backup support for this claim. John writes, “All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”

John says the same thing in two different ways for emphasis and clarity: Everything that ever came into being owes its existence to the Word, Who caused it all to happen. If the Word caused all created things to come into existence, then He must have existed before all created things came into existence. Therefore, the Word could not have been created. Jesus is the uncreated Creator; Jesus is God.

Those who deny the deity of Christ offer this rebuttal, though. “Wait a minute, Greg. You didn’t read the verse carefully. You missed something in the text. Notice the phrase ‘apart from Him.’ The apostle excludes Jesus from the count. If you said, ‘Apart from Billy, the whole family is going to Disneyland’ you wouldn’t mean that Billy wasn’t part of the family, just that he wasn’t included in the count. Every member of the family is going to Disneyland with the exception of Billy. In the same way, every created thing was created by Jesus with the exception of Jesus Himself. Jehovah created Jesus first, then Jesus created everything else. Jesus is not God.”

Note that this rebuttal turns on the ability to replace “apart from Him” with the phrase “with the exception of Jesus.” Allegedly they’re synonymous. Okay, let’s try the replacement and see what happens. The verse then looks like this: “With the exception of Jesus, nothing came into being that has come into being.”

If your brow is furrowed trying to figure this out, I’m not surprised. The reconstructed phrase is nearly nonsense. Strictly speaking, it means that Jesus is the only created thing that exists. Read it again and see for yourself. Obviously, the phrase “apart from Jesus” can’t mean “with the exception of Jesus.” These phrases are not synonymous.

“Apart from Him” means something entirely different. It means “apart from His agency.” It’s the same as saying, “Apart from me you’ll never get to Disneyland. I’ve got the car.” Our paraphrase then looks like this: “Apart from Jesus’ agency nothing came into being that has come into being.” This makes perfect sense in the context. Jesus is the Creator of all created things. Jesus is God.

Let’s try another.

Having a “Peace” about It

Colossians 3:15 is a text that is constantly misunderstood by well-meaning Christians. Paul writes, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” Some have accurately pointed out that the Greek word for “rule” means to act as arbiter or judge. They see this verse as a tool for knowing God’s will for our lives.

The conventional thinking goes something like this. When confronted with a decision, pray. If you feel a “peace” in your heart, God has given you the go-ahead. If you don’t feel peace, don’t proceed. This internal sense of peace acts like a judge helping you make decisions according to the will of God. A paraphrase might be: “And let feelings of peacefulness in your heart be the judge about God’s individual will for your life.” Is this what Paul means?

This is a classic example of how knowledge of the Greek can be dangerous if context is not taken into consideration. The word “peace” actually has two different meanings. It could mean a sense of inner harmony and emotional equanimity. Paul seems to have this definition in mind in Philippians 4:7: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your

minds in Christ Jesus.” This is the subjective sense of peace.

The word also has an objective sense. It sometimes means lack of conflict between two parties formerly at war with each other. This definition is what Paul intends in Romans 5:1: “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Note the distinction between the peace of God and peace with God in these two verses.)

What sense of peace did Paul have in mind when writing to the Colossians? The Greek gives us no indication because the same word is used in all these cases. Once again, context solves the problem. The specific meaning can only be known from the surrounding material.

In verse 11, Paul says that in the Body of Christ there are no divisions between Greek and Jew, slave and free, etc. He appeals for unity in the body characterized by forgiveness, humility, and gentleness. He then adds that harmony (“peace”) should be the rule that guides our relationships.

Paul has the objective sense of peace in mind here—lack of conflict between Christians—not a subjective feeling of peace in an individual Christian’s heart. This becomes obvious when we join the suggested paraphrases with the context:

Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let feelings of peacefulness in your heart be the judge about God’s individual will for your life, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

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Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let harmony, not conflict, be the rule that guides you [plural], to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

The first is completely foreign to the context; the second fits right in with everything that comes before and after. In the context of Colossians 3, there is no hint of using internal feelings as a divine stamp of approval on our decisions. Personal decision-making is not the message of the paragraph. Harmony and unity in the Body is.

Context Is King

Both of these examples illustrate a deeper truth about properly understanding the Bible, or any other communication for that matter: Context is king. The paraphrase principle works so well because it plays on the fact that the meaning of any particular word or phrase is always governed by the role it plays in the context of larger units like sentences and paragraphs.

Think of it this way: Wouldn't it be convenient to have a biblical "tour guide" on call to clear up confusion in the text any time you open your Bible, someone who could tell you the explicit meaning of a verse in many cases, or at least help you to know what the verse doesn't mean and thus narrow your options?

Wouldn't it be helpful to have a tutor who could point out critical clues to the meaning, identify conditions that limit the application of the verse, or indicate the audience the verse may be limited to? If that sounds appealing, then pay attention to what the context can tell you, because it does each of these things. Let's look at them one by one.

"If I Be Lifted Up"

Context often clearly and unambiguously informs us of the

explicit meaning of a phrase or passage. John 12:32 is a case where a phrase can have two widely divergent meanings, yet the author tells us exactly what he has in mind.⁵

It's not uncommon for worship leaders to quote this statement of Jesus: "And I, if I be lifted...will draw all men to Myself." They then go on to explain that in worship we "lift up" the Lord when we exalt Him and declare His glory. If we focus on Jesus and ascribe glory to Him, the power of Christ is released to transform the hearts of those listening and they are drawn to Him.

This is the meaning the worship leader has in mind, but it isn't what Jesus was talking about. John tells us in the very next verse precisely what Jesus meant: "But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die."

When we apply our paraphrase test, the results look like this: "And I, if I be exalted before the people, will draw all men to Myself." But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die."

Oops. Praising Jesus will kill Him? I don't think so. No ambiguity now. In this instance, being "lifted up" clearly means to be crucified.

Understanding this phrase in context sheds light on another familiar passage, John 3:14-15: "And as Moses lifted up [raised in the air] the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up [raised in the air] that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life."

Our paraphrase looks like this: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be crucified that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life."

This makes perfect sense. Jesus had to be crucified before salvation could be offered, an appropriate lead-in to the verse that comes next, the most famous salvation verse in the Bible: John 3:16.

Beware the Ellipses...

If you looked closely, you would have noticed that the worship leader mentioned above did not quote the verse correctly. He left something out. The full text actually reads, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." John 12:32 is nearly always misquoted, albeit unwittingly. Inaccurate quoting, though,

leads to inaccurate interpretations. Beware of ellipses—the three dots (...) that signal something has been left out of a quote—because the omission may be vital to a verse’s meaning.

A prime example of the “error of the ellipses” comes from John 5: 17, 19-20 which one author quotes this way⁶:

My Father has been working until now, and I have been working....Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself; but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does.

The author’s point was that Jesus received guidance directly from the Father. Since Jesus is our model, each of us should learn to “hear the voice of God” in order to know and do the will of God, just as He did.

His omission of verses 18, a portion of 19, and verses 21, 22, and 23 is unfortunate. Each is vital to our understanding and seriously qualifies the meaning of the passage, as this more complete citation of John 5:17-23 shows:

(17) But He answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.”

*(18) For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, **making Himself equal with God.***

*(19) Jesus **therefore** answered and was saying to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. (20) For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, that you may marvel. (21) For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life,*

even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. (22) For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, (23) in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.” [emphasis added]

Note first of all verse 18, the verse that had been completely omitted. The Jews, understanding Jesus’ comments to be a clear claim to deity, seek to kill Him. The word “therefore” in verse 19 indicates that what follows is Jesus’ specific response to the Jews’ concern about His singular claim.

Note also the three phrases in parallel construction: “For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all things...”, “For just as the Father raises the dead...”, and “For not even the Father judges anyone....”

These verses are a complete unit. If the Father showing Jesus “all things that He Himself is doing” is an example for us to model, then we are also to give life to whom we wish, judge the world on the Father’s behalf, and demand that all people honor us as they honor the Father.

Obviously, that is not Jesus’ teaching here. Once again, context is king. In context, these verses have to do with the divinity of Christ. Jesus is unique as the incarnate Son of God and therefore has unique obligations, unique abilities, and a unique relationship with the Father.

Verses 26-27 clear up any question on this score: “For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man.” “Son of Man” is a Messianic title from Daniel 7:13 that Jesus used often.

As Messiah and as the incarnate Son of God Jesus has a singular role. This is why Jesus never directs His disciples to follow His example in John 5. No subsequent writers—Peter, John, Paul, Luke—ever make that connection. Jesus is unique in this regard.

We are not to imitate those things pertaining to Jesus' divinity or His Messianic office. This passage is not given so we would emulate Christ, but so we would adore Him. We know this because we followed the rule: Never read a Bible verse.

The Eliminator

Sometimes context eliminates possible options by clearly indicating what a verse does not mean. In John 20:29, Jesus says to the no-longer-doubting Thomas, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

Jesus' words are often taken as a criticism of those who seek evidence for faith. On this view, Jesus commended "blind" faith as more virtuous. But this interpretation is not possible in light of what John writes next:

Many other signs, therefore, Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [signs] have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

If Thomas wasn't to rely on evidence, then why did John say he included the evidence of miraculous signs expressly for the purpose of aiding belief?

No, Jesus was objecting to something else. Thomas's problem wasn't that he wanted evidence. Most likely it was that he didn't believe the evidence already adequate to establish the fact of the resurrection: the testimony of his fellow disciples ("We have seen the Lord!" v. 25). Thomas demanded an extreme standard of proof: "Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Whatever the meaning behind Jesus' words, it's clear that He did

not mean that a leap of faith is better than a reasoned response of trust.

Truth Shall Set You Free?

Contrary to popular belief, Jesus never said that truth sets us free. His words in John 8:32, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,” are frequently read as a simple truism: Truth sets free. Learn the truth and freedom follows.

Context, our faithful guide, reveals a condition that limits the application of Jesus’ remarks about the impact of truth:

Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:31-32)

Context shows that Jesus’ remarks are conditional: If we do one thing, then another thing follows. If the result is freedom, what are the conditions? In a word, faithful discipleship. We are set free when we abide in (obey, live in accordance with) God’s Word while following Jesus. If you don’t fulfill the conditions, you won’t experience the result.

Many other passages taken naively as unqualified promises actually have conditions attached to them. Claiming them out of context is a fruitless enterprise. They’re not our promises.

“My Sheep Hear My Voice”

Once in a while context will give us a critical clue that helps us decipher a text. Miss the clue and you’ll be lost, because the clue changes everything.

For example, much has been made of Jesus’ words in John 10 about His sheep “hearing” His voice. Many have taken these words to refer to the Christian’s learned ability of perceiving God’s personal instructions or will for his life.

Jesus has nothing like this in mind, though. I know because of a key clarification, often overlooked, a clue that John himself gives early in the chapter. In verse six, John specifically states that when

Jesus speaks of His sheep “hearing His voice” He is using a figure of speech.

The word “voice,” then, can’t actually mean some kind of inner voice because a thing is never a metaphor of itself. A figure of speech is a picture of something else. Jesus must be referring, in a figure, to something else that the phrase “hear my voice” represents. But what?

The context tells the story. Jesus says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me,” and then adds, “and I give eternal life to them” (v. 27-28). Note the sequence: His sheep hear His voice. They follow Him in response. He then gives them eternal life. Hearing Jesus’ voice is a figure of speech for the inner working of the Holy Spirit that leads to our salvation. It results in salvation; it’s not the result of salvation. It’s applied here to non-believers destined for the Kingdom, not believers already in the Kingdom.

This makes perfect sense in the broader context of the chapter. The Jews have no trouble hearing Jesus’ words. They know what Jesus is saying. Their problem is that they don’t respond with belief. Why don’t the Jews “hear” Jesus by responding with belief? Jesus tells them plainly. They don’t “hear” because God is not “speaking” to them. They are not among the sheep the Father has given to the Son (v. 26).

The voice being referred to here is not the still, small voice of private direction given by God to Christians. It’s the effective call of the Holy Spirit bringing non-Christians to salvation, the work of the Father that allows the non-believer to be drawn into Jesus’ arms.

For Your Eyes Only

Sometimes reading the Bible accurately in context can be disheartening. It’s painful to discover that verses once cherished for the emotional comfort they give turn out to have nothing to do with us at all. This often happens with Old Testament promises or encouragements originally meant for someone else that we’ve mistakenly claimed as our own.

A prime example comes from the prophet Jeremiah, through whom God spoke these words: “For I know the plans that I have

for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope'" (Jeremiah 29:11).

The key question here is who is the "you" that God had in mind when He spoke these wonderful words of consolation. A careful examination of the context gives us the answer. The verse was limited to the specific audience identified in Jeremiah 29: 1 and 4:

Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon....Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon....

When we read the full paragraph instead of just one Bible verse the larger picture begins to unfold.

For thus says the Lord, "When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you [the Jewish exiles] and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place, for I know the plans that I have for you [the exiles]," declares the Lord "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you

[Babylon, etc.],” declares the Lord, “and I will bring you back to the place [Jerusalem and Judea] from where I sent you into exile.” Jeremiah 29:10-14

Our faithful guide, context, tells us clearly what God had in mind. After 70 years of discipline, the Jewish exiles would be restored from Babylon to their homeland in Judea and prosper according to the plans of the Lord.

This was a promise for the Jews in exile, not for storm-tossed Christians uncertain about their future. We may learn broader principles from passages like these, like the principle that God keeps His promises when He makes them—a valuable lesson for believers of all eras—but the particular promise in this passage is not for us.⁷

In times of distress or uncertainty, we would do better to focus on promises specifically directed at followers of Christ, verses like “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28), or “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

The practice of citing a verse without addressing the role it plays in a passage is called “proof-texting.” It’s a dangerous habit. Simply “claiming” a verse doesn’t make it our own.

Whether claiming promises during difficult times or citing verses to substantiate my own biblical views, I want to be confident the texts I use as proof of my point actually mean what I think they mean. That’s why I’m always on the alert when reading popular books written on biblical issues. Are the authors simply quoting verses to buttress their points, or are they interpreting the Scripture carefully by looking at the details of the context?

Biblical Fast Food?

The concept of “never read a Bible verse” raises legitimate questions concerning the daily devotionals that are so popular today, handbooks of short messages built around single verses, sometimes only a phrase.

For many, these vignettes have become a primary source of daily nourishment. They’re inspirational and short, able to be wedged into the busiest schedule. But they come with a serious drawback.

By focusing only on pieces of a passage, readers may actually miss the point of the passage. If we're just reading snatches of text, what's our guarantee that the inspirational feelings we experience aren't just false hopes or mere emotion? The difference is critical. It's the distinction between believe and make-believe.

We can't know what God is talking about or teaching us by looking at an isolated sentence or phrase. And if we take the Scripture in a way God did not mean it—if what we're teaching from the verse is not really the teaching of the verse—then the words lose their authority. As Christians our commitment should be to the truth of the passage, not to the feeling a certain reading of that passage gives us. If we ignore that priority, then whatever feeling we may have had will have been based on fantasy—make-believe.

Fortunately, the liability can be overcome by remembering our basic rule: Never read a Bible verse. Instead, read a paragraph, at least. Always check the context. Observe the flow of thought. Then focus on the verse itself.

Remember, meaning always flows from the top down, from the larger units to the smaller. A reflection on a Bible passage from a devotional or a sermon may be edifying, encouraging, and uplifting. But if it's not the message of the text—God's message—it lacks power even when the quote comes right out of the Bible.

Misconstruing a passage can actually neutralize the Word of God. It can rob the Scripture of its authority and power. The entire reason we go to the Bible in the first place—to get God's truth and apply it to our lives—is thwarted.

If you habitually take the fast food approach when it comes to the Bible, try this experiment. For the next three months, put away your one-verse devotionals. Instead, make the time to sit down with the Lord to a real meal. Don't be satisfied with tidbits; commit yourself to read whole chapters.

I suspect that, if you'll do this, you will quickly begin to feel the difference as you "renew your mind" each day. You'll be confident that the sense of comfort and safety you experience will be grounded in truth and not presumption, fact not fantasy. You may even find you'll never go back to biblical "fast food" again.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

Some think getting a word from God is a substitute for careful Bible study. But it's not wise to ask the Holy Spirit to give you the right interpretation of a text. He has not committed Himself to do that for you. Instead, the Spirit "illuminates" the Word, shedding light on the text, helping us to see what is already there in the words the Holy Spirit Himself inspired (see 1 Corinthians 2:10-16). The Holy Spirit does not give us secret messages hidden between the lines.

This is why Paul tells Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). God will help us, but He won't do the work for us.

If you think God is telling you something through Scripture that is not connected to the meaning of the words in their context, it can't be God because He chose to communicate through language, not around it.

The Holy Spirit does not give new information not already evident in the inspired words. The curriculum, so to speak, is standardized for all Christians. Every person has equal access to the meaning. There are no private messages in Scripture.

Peter is clear on this point. He writes:

But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. (2 Peter 1:20-2:1)

According to the Apostle, because there is a Divine author behind prophesy, there is a particular truth that is intended that individual, personalized interpretations obscure and even distort (note the reference to false prophets and false teachers).

The same reasoning applies to all of Scripture, not just the words of the prophets, because the same Divine author is behind the entire Bible. The meaning God originally intended when He gave the Scripture through the inspired authors is the same meaning for anyone reading the verse today.

There are no “private” messages in the Bible. Simply put, a text cannot mean what it never meant.⁸ The Holy Spirit did not mean one thing when Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, for example, and then something entirely different when you read it 2000 years later.

This is why you should always try to take the text at face value whenever possible instead of looking for a personal message in words that originally meant something else.

“Do you take the Bible literally?” is a question frequently asked about biblical interpretation. I answer that I try to read the Bible with the precision the writer intended. I take it at its plain meaning unless I have some good reason to do otherwise.

When you think about it, this is the basic rule we apply to everything we read: novels, newspapers, periodicals, and poems. Ironically, as Evangelicals we pride ourselves on being “biblical literalists,” yet feel comfortable abandoning the plain, literal sense of the passage whenever “the Spirit leads.” We chide the Roman Catholic church for this, yet see no harm when it’s regularly done in our own circles.

Remember our basic rule: Never read a Bible verse. Always check the context, observe the flow of thought, then focus on the verse.

If you will do this one thing—if you will read carefully in the context applying the paraphrase principle—you will begin to understand the Bible as God intended and Scripture will open up for you like never before. Without the bigger picture, though, you’ll be lost.

Only when you are properly informed by God's Word the way it was written—in its context—can you be transformed by it. Every piece becomes powerful when it is working together with the whole as the Holy Spirit intended.

It's the most important practical lesson I've ever learned...and the single most important thing I could ever teach you.

For Further Reading:

Russell, Walt. *Playing with Fire—How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000.

Koukl, Gregory. “*The Perils of Prooftexting*” *Solid Ground*, Sept-Oct 1999, http://str.org/free/solid_ground/SG9909.htm

Sire, James. *Scripture Twisting*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980.

Carson, D.A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.

Fee, Gordon, & Stuart, Douglas. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982.

Notes

1 Notice I didn't say "Never quote a Bible verse." Rather, beware of simply reading the verse expecting to get the accurate meaning in isolation from the rest of the passage.

2 I highly recommend Walt Russell's *Playing with Fire—How the Bible Ignites Change in Your Soul* (NavPress) as a guide to proper Bible study habits (available through STR), or Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Zondervan). See also D.A. Carson's *Exegetical Fallacies* (Baker), and James Sire's *Scripture Twisting* (InterVarsity Press).

3 All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

4 The archaic rendering of the King James Bible creates unnecessary confusion for the modern reader. I recommend the KJV for any reader who is 350 years old or older. All others would do better with a more recent version.

5 This happens with some frequency in the Scriptures. Compare Matthew 13:24-30 with 13:36-43 where Jesus gives an explicit interpretation of His own parable.

6 Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), chapter 6, p. 65.

7 To sharpen the point, the prophet Daniel confirms this meaning. He refers to the Jeremiah text in Daniel 9:1-2 and clearly understands it as applying to exiled Israel. He follows with his famous prayer of confession, repentance, and request for restoration of the exiles to the Promised Land.

8 Fee, Gordon, & Stuart, Douglas, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 27.



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