

Dear Friends,

If I were to assign my perception of most errant beliefs regarding Scripture's teaching, aside from the basic corruption of the mind, it would be non-contextual study and interpretation of Scripture. We see this error when someone isolates one verse and forms an opinion of its teaching that wholly ignores surrounding verses, the flowing context in which that verse appears. There is a cliché that effectively states, "A text without its context is a pretext." So true. Literary context is not discovered by chasing one word from a verse all over the Bible to every other verse where the word appears. "Context" means the flowing thoughts in the immediate literary proximity to the verse you study. Wise study practices systematically expand our study of surrounding verses in an outward and thorough form. What may seem unclear in the verse at hand will often be clarified and simplified by the surrounding verses.

A sad and egregious example of this non-contextual study and interpretation of Scripture is the frequent habit of many Bible teachers who interpret lessons addressed to born-again believers, teaching them (Teaching us) how to live the life of faith to the glory of God wrongly, wresting the verse or lesson from its context and using it to teach the errant ideas of either salvation by works or salvation by a hybrid mixture of God's grace and man's works. These errant views commit two errors. 1) They pervert Biblical teaching of our salvation being all of God and all of His gracious actions toward His people. 2) They rob believers of needed instruction of how we should live our lives today, in the here and now, so as to glorify God for His many blessings toward us. You see one of many corrupt fruits of this error in the false motive of professing Christians who think they must live a godly life to gain something for themselves, either in this life or in eternity. They have no real concept of living the selfless Christian life all and only for the glory of God and the service of His people.

I hope through this study to encourage a more sound and healthy right study and right interpretation of Scripture.

God bless,
Joe Holder

P. S. I was not able to send last week's Gleanings because of personal illness. I am doing much better, though the path to full recovery shall likely be long and tedious. I sincerely appreciate the many prayers and encouraging thoughts many of you sent my way during this season. Please keep praying. I hope to stay in my "Saddle" for some time to come, Lord willing.

Contextual Spiral

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. (Galatians 2:15-16 KJV 1900)

Often textbooks or research into proper Biblical interpretation will emphasize the "Contextual Spiral." In this concept you start with your study verse or lesson. Then you methodically expand your study of other verses in that context, systematically "Spiraling" out from your beginning lesson in an ever

widening circle. In effect, the idea models a systematic contextual study of the Bible. Context is defined in literary studies as text that is located in the same literary setting as your key passage, same chapter or same book/letter, for example. Many years ago a friend highly recommended a book to me that was entitled to indicate that the subject was contextual study habits. In fact nothing in this book respected any form or degree of true contextual study. The author had an agenda, and he used this title to hide it. He actually advocated a raw concordance study of the Bible. If you want to study faith in Galatians, look up every appearance of the word in the Bible and chase them all in your study. The man had no sense of true contextual study whatever.

One of the worst books a young Bible student can buy is "Treasure of Scripture Knowledge." It lists every verse in the Bible where each word appears, something of a glorified concordance. The concept, like the above book, ignores true literary context and chases all over the Bible, contradicting or ignoring context, not following it. If you were taking a college course in Shakespearean literature, and you submitted a report to your professor based on this approach, you'd receive an "F" and a serious lecture from your professor.

What is the context of our study passage? Paul and Barnabas were ministering at Antioch Church, primarily a Gentile church. Peter apparently visited Antioch Church and appeared to be quite comfortable with Gentile believers and their non-kosher diet. His comfort was short-lived.

For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. (Galatians 2:12 KJV1900)

The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe. (Proverbs 29:25 KJV)

Even Peter was intimidated by fear of Jewish believers from Jerusalem Church who apparently, though believers, yet held to Jewish rules regarding diet and other habits. He allowed himself to fall into the deceitful snare of the fear of man. He was an apostle. He could rightly have stood his ground and joined Paul in a beneficial lesson to those legalistic believers. In Romans 14 Paul addressed this question in a direct manner and taught the Romans that they should eat whatever they eat with thanksgiving to the Lord, not with a strict kosher attitude toward it.

But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews? (Galatians 2:14 KJV 1900)

Diet, especially a legalistic, “If you eat the wrong food, you are spiritually unclean,” according to Paul, is “*not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel.*” The true context of our study verse is this controversy over diet, a conflict that Peter and other believers accepted briefly. The context deals with gracious and godly lifestyles for believers, not salvation. To wrest this lesson into a salvation idea wholly ignores its context and perverts the contextual lesson.

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. Justification in this context is not eternal justification, for the Old Testament Law of Moses never justified anyone eternally. (Hebrews 10:1-4 KJV) However, it did justify many believing Jews during its assigned time in the sense of training and validating their faith and lifestyle.

What about “the faith of Christ” in this lesson? Many naïve Bible students reject and even ridicule this idea. However, it appears several times in the New Testament. And a growing number of New Testament Greek scholars presently defend the term rather than alter the words and the idea. Many years ago I recall talking with a man about this idea. He quoted 2 Corinthians 5:7, “*For we walk by faith, not by sight,*” concluding that, if Jesus had faith, He could not be omniscient. His reference to the 2 Corinthians 5 passage sadly serves as another example of non-contextual Bible interpretation. In that context, Paul is teaching about death and life after death. We believe in life after death. Scripture teaches it, Old and New Testament. But we haven’t died and experienced it, so, according to Paul, we must accept this fact by faith. This verse does not teach a general principle of Biblical faith. It teaches a specific principle of faith regarding our belief in life after death.

Further, both testaments repeatedly teach that God’s faithfulness—and that includes Jesus—is a matter of His faithful promise. In fact, according to many passages, God’s faithfulness to His people is a matter of His covenant promise, even by His oath to Abraham. (Genesis 22:16; Hebrews 6:13-14 KJV) He officially stated the fact and pledged Himself to it. Every legal contract contains a “Boiler Plate” paragraph in which, by signing the document, you agree that you sign it and agree to all the terms of the contract “In good faith.” You sincerely intend to fulfill your obligations under that contract. That God gave us His “Good faith” promise to be faithful in no way contradicts any Biblical principle regarding either God’s character or Biblical faith.

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. A further indication that Paul was not teaching hybrid salvation, part by works and part by grace; who is the “we” whom Paul mentions in this verse? Obviously, he included himself. Consider the next verse.

But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid. (Galatians 2:17 KJV)

Scripture teaches that our eternal justification is a single act, accomplished by God in Jesus once and for all time to come.

*And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, **which delivered us from the wrath to come.*** (1 Thessalonians 1:10 KJV, emphasis added)

Our eternal salvation, our permanent relationship with God, is not an ongoing scenario that we seek to accomplish by our effort, by our works. It is an accomplished fact. That fact lies at the heart of the gospel we preach. We “...**declare his generation,**” (Isaiah 53:8 KJV) tell people, with affirming evidence and comfort, that they belong to the family of God, His “Generation.”

What Paul described in our study passage is an ongoing habit of life and of faith. It teaches us how to live that life of faith in the here and now, and in a manner that glorifies our God. If we walk by faith, we constantly strive to live closer to our Lord by walking in fellowship with Him. Paul describes the godly, the faith-lifestyle, of born-again believers, not the process of self-salvation.

This Bible study habit called “Contextual Spiral” is quite simple. Anchor your mind in your study verse or lesson. Very slowly and methodically work your way out (Above and below it) from that verse or lesson. Don’t stop til you’ve covered the whole chapter in which the lesson appears. Keep following the spiral outward till you’ve covered the whole book or letter in which the lesson appears. How does this lesson integrate into the purpose and message of the whole letter? A habit that I’ve found quite helpful in this spiraling study of a passage; when you get to the whole book or letter, as with each step outward in the spiral, read it several times. Based on the most literal and logical reading of the letter possible, ponder a simple title that captures the message of the letter. Example. When I studied the Old Testament Book of Jonah, my title for the book was “I won’t go; I will go; I wish I hadn’t gone.”

I dearly love the arrangement of Bible text into chapters and verses. That style makes finding a particular verse far simpler than it might be in a flowing text with no division into smaller segments. However, a downside to avoid is not to read a verse and think that verse stands all alone in the Bible. Every sentence, every verse, every lesson in the Bible should be interpreted in its literary context, not as if it were isolated apart from its literary context. Many errors grow out of a blind attempt to interpret one verse apart from its context. What does this lesson mean in light of the surrounding verses and lessons? In light of the dominant message of the whole letter or book?

*Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but **which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.*** (1 Corinthians 2:13 KJV; emphasis added)

When Paul wrote this verse, he set the goal high and quite clear for us. Our task in studying the Bible is not to find the most imaginative interpretation available. Many people have gone far more into

this idea than you or I. Our divine assignment is to find the Holy Ghost's intended meaning, what He teaches from the passage. And the best way to accomplish this task is to compare and to study the content of our "Spiritual" Book, our Bible. Compare passages. Study to learn the similarities, as well as the differences between one passage and the other. But always make His intended meaning your goal, not the most imaginative interpretation you can create. What we need from Scripture is God's message to us, not our private opinion or interpretation of it.

Elder Joe Holder