

Dear Friends,

My friends often tease me for my regular habit of talking and trying to follow context in Bible study and interpretation. If we practice Paul's words, "...comparing spiritual things with spiritual," (1 Corinthians 2:13 KJV) we should strive always to follow a passage's context in our study and interpretation. Bible students and teachers of all stripe occasionally fall into the bad habit of interpreting a verse or passage out of--and often contradictory to--its literary context. Based on Peter's caution in our study passage for this week, we follow errant interpretations "...to our own destruction," to the damage or ruin of our sound Biblical faith.

Without exception, a contextual study and interpretation of a passage will lead us to a sound and consistent-with-other-Scripture, including the Scripture in the immediate literary context of the passage being studied. This habit should lead us to a related habit. We may all comfortably agree with Peter that Paul wrote some things "...**hard to be understood**." How should we go about interpreting those passages? Instead of stretching literary context and forming questionable ideas regarding this passage, we should invest large blocks of time studying those "Easier to be understood" passage in Paul's writings. As we come to reasonable and comfortable interpretations of those passages, we should keep in mind that, whatever Paul intended with the "...hard to be understood" passages, he (The Holy Spirit who guided his writing) never contradicted the teachings of those easier to understand passages. Wise study directs us to interpretations of those difficult passages that fully agree and harmonize with the easier-to-understand passages.

God bless our study of--and our respect for--His Word,  
Joe Holder

### **Context, Context, Context**

*And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15-16 KJV 1900)*

I am profoundly grateful for the present arrangement of the Bible into chapters and verses. It facilitates locating a passage as well as communicating the passage you want to share with someone else. However, chapters and verses are not inspired. Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, is credited with the idea around 1227. There are instances of sentences being broken by chapter divisions (For example, Acts 21:40-22:1). Multiple examples could be given of subject matter being broken by chapter divisions. Likely the strongest downside to this division is the habit of people picking and choosing a verse and isolating it from its context, as if that single verse were the whole Bible. Modern and traditional preachers alike fall into this hermeneutical trap. The habit fails to respect the complete Bible as our supreme and exclusive authority for sound faith and Christian conduct. It supplants Scripture alone with personal opinion/perception.

Peter acknowledged that, even for himself, an inspired apostle, personal acquaintance of Paul, and first-generation believer, Paul's writings were "Scripture," the holy writings inspired by the Holy Spirit, as well as containing some things "...hard to understand." "Hard to understand" does not give us license to ignore context and take flight into fantasy or imagination, arriving at our own "...private interpretation" of the Scriptures. (2 Peter 1:20 KJV) In fact, when you arrive at an unusual interpretation of Scripture in your personal study, beware. Expose it to the bright sunlight of the Lord's "...pillar and ground of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:15 KJV) Example. Many years ago, in studying a particularly "Hard to understand" passage from Paul's writings, I arrived at a different—very different—interpretation of the passage. It didn't contradict basic Bible doctrine, but it was different from any view I'd ever read or heard. Shortly thereafter a friend and a good Bible student phoned me. We always engaged in a hearty Bible discussion in those calls. During the conversation, I explained my view to my friend. He listened and paused a few seconds before replying, "Joe, your guess is as good as anyone else's." Ouch. But he said what I needed to hear. He sent me back to the Scripture for a deeper study, and soon I realized that my novel idea could not endure the light of context. I gladly abandoned it and continued my study. This personal lesson served to reinforce my belief in the point Paul made in 1 Timothy 3:15; the Lord's church, not personal opinion or interpretation, is the Lord's "...pillar and ground of the truth."

If you consistently believe in eternal salvation from the guilt of sin by the Lord's grace alone through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, you will frequently encounter this non-contextual interpretation of Scripture by people who believe in salvation by works or by a hybrid mixture of works and grace. They commonly grab phrases or brief statements out of context and try to use them to refute your belief. In fact, this use of Scripture out of context more serves to expose the weakness of their belief than refute your belief.

If you were reading any literary work outside the Bible, you'd carefully observe the author's contextual development of the plot he weaves into his writing to communicate his "Story" to you. Why ignore similar respect for the divine Author (Who chose human writers to put His words into written documents for our spiritual learning) of Scripture?

I could offer a near endless list of Scriptures that are frequently interpreted apart from their context, immediate and/or broad. And, as Peter warned, these errant interpretations lead to shipwrecked faith, "...to their own destruction," not to sound Biblical faith.

Let's examine a common example of this habit of interpret-one-verse-as-if-it-is-the-whole-Bible and wholly apart from its actual literary context.

*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 KJV)*

An occasional interpretation of this verse teaches that God either causes or "Orchestrates" every event that occurs in human history so that, however destructive, heinous, and evil the event, God is involved in its occurrence so that He can use it for a supposed greater good. Think. According to this view, the Holocaust was no less caused by God than the Virgin Birth. We shall examine the actual context of the

verse and seek an interpretation that agrees with its context, but let's first examine the broader context of Scripture. This idea contradicts major Biblical teaching regarding sin, as well as the moral character of God.

1. In Romans 5:12-21, Paul specifically stated that sin entered the world, "**by one man.**" He didn't write a single word to suggest that sin entered the world by divine purpose or cause.

2. In 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, Paul wrote, "*Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*" So which verse states the truth? Does God actually cooperate with Satan and cause and/or orchestrate every sinful event that occurs? Or does He always categorically work against Satan and evil, rejecting them and teaching His children to follow His example and also reject them? When Adam sinned, did he really "Sin," or did he actually obey God's directive? And if he obeyed God by sinning, why did God punish him for obeying? Scripture never contradicts itself, but the isolated interpretation of Romans 8:28 categorically contradicts the teaching of 2 Corinthians 6:14-16.

3. 1 John 2:16, "*For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.*" The errant view of Romans 8:28 teaches that God is ultimately the cause of "...all that is in the world," including lust and her inevitable "Child," sin of all kinds. If this is the correct view, why did John contradict the idea and categorically state that "...all that is in the world...is **not of the Father, but is of the world.**" In this verse, "**of**" defines cause or source. The contradiction is irreconcilable, a solemn clue to the serious Bible student that his/her interpretation of one or the other verses is wrong.

4. James 3:10, "*Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.*" Odd, if inspired (By God) Scripture categorically states that one mouth should not speak evil and good, that "...these things ought not so to be," and if the idea that God caused everything is true, why would God cause something that God in Scripture declares "*Ought not so to be*"? Why didn't God simply not cause it? Another glaring contradiction that right interpretation of Scripture eliminates.

I could continue, but these Biblical examples affirm the reality that the idea of God either causing or manipulating every event in human history is wrong. A careful study of Romans 3:5-8 will affirm (Within the same letter, written by the same Paul to the same audience, Roman Christians) that Paul in fact was aware of this errant view and rejected it in the strongest words he could have chosen. Not only did Paul reject the idea of God outright causing sin (Notice his emphatic rejection of the amoral "*Let us do evil that good may come*"), but he also rejected the idea of God orchestrating sin for His purposes ("*If our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God...*"). He even objected that anyone who suggested that he believed either idea committed slander against him. God neither caused sin, nor is He an accomplice in the occurrence of sin, either of which would make God guilty of sin, "**...for then how shall God judge the world?**" (Romans 3:6 KJV)

Likely one significant cause of this errant idea is the casual interpretation of “all things” in the verse. In both Scripture and in common human writing and speech, “all” typically refers to “all” of whatever is being considered in the literary context of the term, not necessarily a universal inclusion. A Bible example will make the point clearly.

*And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that **all the world** should be taxed.* (Luke 2:1 KJV; emphasis added)

Did Luke—and by implication the Holy Spirit Himself—think that Caesar’s tax edict applied to every living human being on Planet Earth at the time? How much tax did first century American Indians pay to Rome as a result of this edict? What is the meaning of “**all** the world” in this verse? It means that all people who resided in the Roman Empire, “all” the Roman “world,” at the time, were subject to this tax. No class of people in the Roman Empire were exempted. Thus, logically and factually, “all the world” referred only to all humans who lived in the “Roman world” at the time.

Seeming universal terms are seldom used or intended to be understood in the broadest universal sense. We need to interpret such words within the literary context in which the word appears.

So what is the literary context of Romans 8:28? If we try to discover its immediate contextual meaning, what might we learn about its true teaching?

First, let’s consider this term “all things.” In any literary context, many common simple words will appear and fill out the intended meaning of the writing. And, within that context, these terms necessarily mean the same thing. Otherwise, we could not know the author’s intended meaning at all. We already are aware of “all things” in Verse 28. Does this same term appear anywhere else in the literary context of Verse 28? Ah, it does.

*What shall we then say to **these things**? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us **all things**?* (Romans 8:31-32 KJV)

In these two verses, Paul refers to “these things” and to “all things,” the precise two words at the heart of the Romans 8:28 question. What are the “all things” to which Paul referred? In context, he named a list of five specific acts of God that outline His work of salvation from before time, *...he did foreknow,* to after time, *...he glorified.* He knew, loved and chose His people in Jesus before He created time, and He shall fully glorify us in His resurrection of our bodies at the Second Coming, after time.

If we follow literary protocol and accept the same meaning of “all things” in both verses, we are forced to the immoral and illogical conclusion that Jesus’ death literally caused “all things” evil and sinful.

Verse 32 states that God, through delivering Jesus up “for us all” shall freely give us “all things.” If we force a universal meaning onto “all things” in Verse 28, we cannot logically assign a different meaning to the same term in Verse 32. So who will acknowledge this glaring error that, had Jesus not come, there would be no evil, no bad events in the history of the world?

However, if we interpret Romans 8:28 in its literary context, Paul names the “all things” that always—no exception— work together, and they always—no exception—work for the good of those who love God. God started this “*work together for good*” process before time, and He shall continue the process till after time and the Second Coming. What is the “Good” outcome that God has determined for His children, for those who love Him? They shall all be glorified with Him and in His image at the Second Coming.

Any conscientious Bible student will gladly agree that Paul wrote some things that are difficult to understand. However, our task in studying those passages is to confine our interpretation to doctrines and ideas that harmonize with the simple “Easy to understand” teachings that he wrote, ***so that our interpretation of all Scripture harmonizes with all Scripture, and with the moral character of God.***

Elder Joe Holder