

Perplexed Without Context

by David Servant

The sermon highlights the critical need to interpret scripture within its context to avoid misrepresentation and doctrinal errors.

Scripture: Psalm 14:1, Matthew 24:42, 1 Thessalonians 5:1, James 2:5

Topics: "Biblical Interpretation", "Contextual Understanding"

Description

David Servant emphasizes the importance of reading Bible verses within their context to avoid misrepresenting God's Word. Using the example of misinterpretations around Jesus' return, he highlights the significance of understanding the wider context of Scripture to grasp the true meaning of passages. Servant cautions against extracting verses to fit personal beliefs and urges listeners to consider the entirety of the Bible for a consistent understanding of God's message.

Transcript

Imagine that I deliver to you, on behalf of one of your friends, a gift box of assorted chocolates. As you open the box in my presence, I hear you say,

Oh, this is what I was hoping it would be! I love chocolates! And look at this! Peanut butter melt-aways! My favorites! And oh, I love these ones with the hazelnut cream on the inside! And I can't control myself when I see these caramels! Wow, look at those raspberry creams! I love them!

But then you pause and say,

Oh, but there's a few here with coconut on the top. Here's one right here.

And as you hold it up for me to see, you say,

I don't like these chocolates! I'll share them with someone who does!

Finally, imagine that I report your reaction to your friend who sent you that box of chocolates. Imagine me saying to her, "I delivered that box of chocolates, and I was right there when your friend opened it up. I heard your friend say, 'I don't like these chocolates!'"

Have I lied? Technically, no. I've quoted you verbatim. But have I told the truth? No, because I've seriously misrepresented what you communicated. If you discover what I've done, you'll be angry with me, because

I've taken something you said and lifted it from its context. You loved the chocolates that your friend sent, but I conveyed that you didn't like them at all.

And this leads me to the point of this e-teaching. People do what I've just described all the time with God's Word. By lifting Bible verses from their context, they misrepresent God, and actually extract lies from the Truth.

Let me begin with a classic example.

You are probably familiar with the following verses from Scripture, spoken by Jesus to His disciples during His Olivet Discourse, found in Matthew chapters 24-25:

Be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming....for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will (Matt. 24:42, 44).

Be on the alert then, for you do not know the day nor the hour (Matt. 25:13).

These words have often been construed to say that no one has any clue as to when Jesus will return. It is frequently stated that there is no prophecy in Scripture that needs to be fulfilled before Jesus comes back. He could return today, we are told.

Additionally, those same two verses are often used to prove that Jesus will return before the coming global tribulation. Over the years I've heard it argued repeatedly, "If Jesus were to return at the end of the Tribulation Period, then His coming wouldn't be a surprise, and what He told us about not knowing the day or hour wouldn't be true! Jesus is coming like a thief in the night! That is what He said!"

But those who make such statements completely ignore the context of Jesus' words and totally misrepresent what He communicated. The clear purpose of Jesus' words to His closest disciples in Matthew 24 and 25 was to prepare them so that they not be caught off guard when He returns, as so many others will be. So He told them exactly what to expect just before His coming. Let's look at it.

First, Jesus told His disciples that there will be many who will come and claim to be the Christ, and who will mislead many (24:5). There will be wars and rumors of wars, as well as famines and earthquakes in various places (24:6-7). There will be world-wide persecution against Jesus' followers (24:9). There will be a great apostasy (24:10). Many false prophets will arise and mislead many (24:11). Lawlessness will increase, and most people's love will grow cold (24:12). The gospel will be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations (24:14).

Reiterating those same themes in greater detail, Jesus then told His disciples that when they see the antichrist standing in the holy place---what was foretold by the prophet Daniel---then those who are in Judea are to flee to the mountains, because that will mark the beginning of the worst tribulation the world has ever seen (24:15-21).

There will then be false christs and false prophets who will show great signs and wonders. Jesus solemnly admonished His disciples to not believe any reports that He has returned to certain geographical places. He told them that His return would be unmistakable, like lightning across the sky (24:23-27).

Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, the moon will naturally not shine, stars will fall from the sky, and "the power of the heavens will be shaken" (24:29).

Jesus continued:

And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (Matt. 24:30-31).

Jesus' very next words were:

Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door (Matt. 24:32-33).

Jesus wanted His disciples to recognize, by the events that will precede His coming, when His coming would be very close, "right near the door." He illustrated His point with a blossoming fig tree. When it sprouts leaves, summer is quite near! So clearly, Jesus didn't believe that His return could occur at any time, or that His disciples would not have a clue as to when He was about to appear in the sky. Just the opposite was true! He wanted them to know when His return would be just a short time away, perhaps within just weeks or even days.

Finally we read His famous words---that are so often misconstrued---within their actual context. Just three verses later, Jesus said,

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone (Matt. 24:36).

Did He mean by that statement that no one would have any clue when He might return? That it could happen at any time? That there would be nothing that would occur beforehand that would help His disciples to know when His return was near? That it could happen today, for example? Obviously not! To say otherwise is to make Him say the exact opposite of what He actually was trying to say.

The very next verses say:

For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one will be left (Matt. 24:37-41).

Although most people were surprised by the flood, Noah certainly wasn't! Jesus' return will catch the world by surprise, but not the people of God who are staying alert.

In the very next verse, Jesus compared Himself to a thief in the night. Once again, He wasn't saying that everyone would be surprised when He returned. The potential to be surprised existed, but clearly Jesus did not want His disciples to be the least bit surprised:

Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also must be ready;

for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will (Matt. 24:42-44, emphasis added).

Jesus told His disciples that they didn't know the day or hour of His return. But, after the rise of many false prophets, after the rise of the antichrist who performs signs and wonders, after global persecution, after the sun and moon turn dark and stars fall from the sky, Jesus' alert disciples will know He is "right at the door."

Only when we read Bible verses within their context are we actually reading safely. And not only is the immediate context important, but also the wider context of the entire Bible is also important to consider, since the Bible is consistent from cover to cover.

Consider some of Paul's words about the surprise element of Jesus' coming:

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night [sound familiar?]. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day (1 Thes. 5:1-5).

Paul plainly stated that Jesus' return "like a thief in the night" would not "overtake you like a thief."

There is No God

I would go so far as to say that most doctrinal error is the result of extracting Bible verses from their all-important context. Truly, the Bible can be made to say anything a person wants it to say by ignoring context. For example, did you know the Bible teaches that God doesn't exist? Indeed, it does. Psalm 14:1 says, "There is no God." Oh, but I forgot to quote those words within their context. The full verse says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" That is an obvious example of what is done all the time on a much more sophisticated level, often by people with "Ph.D." after their names.

Because context is ignored, I'm sure to receive a few emails from readers who will send me their dissertations on the pre-tribulation rapture. Those who do have ignored the context of my teaching. This is not a teaching about a post-tribulation rapture. This is a teaching about the importance of context. I used one example in my teaching of how some folks, in an attempt to prove that the rapture occurs before the Tribulation, ignore the context of the verses that they extract from Jesus' Olivet Discourse. (So please, hold those dissertations!)

Most of the criticism that I receive regarding what I teach comes from people who ignore context. They often pull one sentence from a book chapter, or extract four words out of fifty paragraphs in an e-teaching, and blast me. I often find myself replying to them by saying, "Please read everything I wrote."

In an e-teaching two months ago, titled God's Regrets, for example, I wrote about the inherent limitations of foreknowledge. I did my best to explain that, if God foreknows something, there has to be something to foreknow. Just as God doesn't know, for example, the final score of last night's game between the Boston Red Sox and the Green Bay Packers, neither does He know the final score of tomorrow's game between the Los Angeles Rams and the Pittsburgh Penguins. If God doesn't know the final scores of past games that were never played (especially games between baseball and football teams!), He certainly doesn't foreknow the final scores of future games that will never be played (especially games between football and hockey teams!). Free moral agents must be permitted to make decisions in the realm of time if God is to

foreknow those decisions before time began. And for that simple reason, He tests free moral agents in order to know, and thus foreknow, what they will do.

Throughout my article, I repeatedly affirmed God's ability to foreknow, from the foundation of the world, everything that would occur in the future. Yet a few folks wrote to correct me on the fact that I said that "God can't" know something, explaining to me that God knows everything and there is nothing He can't do. How I wish people would read what I write in context! I have a small idea of how God must feel!

Incidentally, I wonder what those folks would have written if I had said that God cannot lie, or be tempted with evil, or change, or deny Himself, four things the Bible itself says God cannot do (Titus 1:2; Jas. 1:13; Mal. 3:6, 2 Tim. 2:13)!

A New Revelation

Let's conclude with an exercise in paying attention to context. Take a look at this verse in James:

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (Jas. 2:5).

James asks his readers a rhetorical question, that is, a question whose answer is so obvious that it is not really a question at all, but a statement intended to point out what is quite obvious. Assuredly, God has indeed chosen "the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom."

So, praise the Lord, all poor people will be saved! The Bible plainly says that God has chosen them "to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom." Surely the choices of an all-powerful God cannot be thwarted by anyone or anything, can they? If God has chosen them, then they are chosen, and there is nothing they or anyone else can do about it. And what are they chosen for? To be "rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom."

And I have another proof-text! Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20).

So there you have it. All poor people will go to heaven.

All we need to determine now is what defines someone as being poor. Then we don't need to preach the gospel to those people, as their salvation is secure!

How's that for a new revelation? And straight from the Bible!

Hopefully I haven't persuaded you to believe my new revelation, and a few other scriptures have come to your mind that bring some balance to my unbalanced interpretation. Hopefully you are considering James 2:5 within its biblical context, and thus you know it can't mean what I'm trying to make it mean. Just because we've found a verse that says God has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom does not prove that all poor people will go to heaven.

Yet folks take other New Testament verses that say that we have been chosen from the beginning, and in spite of what all of Scripture plainly teaches, try to persuade us that God has chosen some people for salvation and some people for damnation, and it doesn't have a thing to do with Him foreseeing their faith in Jesus. No, it was (supposedly) an unconditional election (which is actually an oxymoron, as all elections are conditional).

Scripture affirms thousands of times that we are all free moral agents who either yield to or resist God's universal drawing, and we all therefore determine our own eternal destinies. Those who are promoting the silly idea that God has unconditionally preselected some for salvation because the Bible says we're chosen are akin to people who can look at the ocean and call it a fish. They're ignoring context in a major way.

Beware of those who pull out their lists of "proof texts" to show you "what the Bible teaches." That is how cults and Calvinists operate. (For an in-depth look of Calvinism's strange doctrines, you can read Calvinism's Five Points Considered online) The Bible is inspired by One Person from beginning to end. That Person is not confused. True doctrine harmonizes with the entire Bible.

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