

Transcript 128

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Today we're going to be talking about, I guess I don't know if the mistake is the right term, but a way that a lot of people use the Bible in a way that's not all that helpful and it can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. So we're talking primarily about people taking Scripture verses out of context. So we're going to be discussing some of the most common examples of this.

Shea Houdmann

And when you say it's important to study the Bible in context or saying, don't just grab one verse or even 2 verses or even 3 verses, and only focus on that. You have to look at what's surrounding it, especially in like Paul's epistles for examples if he's talking about a topic for an entire paragraph or multiple paragraphs to take one verse and make that mean something on its own when it only means something within that whole context, it can be dangerous. So we're going to be talking about that this morning, just kind of going through some of the most common examples this and maybe a better way to approach studying scriptures.

Shea Houdmann

So joining me today is Jeff, Jeff is the administrator of bibleref.com

Jeff Laird

Hello

Shea Houdmann

And Kevin, who's the managing editor of Got Questions Ministry. So maybe I'll start off a little bit with Philippians 4:13. Where depending on the translation says something to the effect of, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. It's a very popular verse to use. You here see a lot of professional athletes who have this verse on their shoes or on their foreheads or on their eye black or wherever, and using it as if I can do all things through Christ strengthens me, means I can perform any athletic feat. There's nothing on this athletic field that I can't accomplish. Well, that's definitely not what it means. And other people will say that it means I can accomplish anything in life. That there is with Christ on my side there's absolutely nothing I can't do.

Shea Houdmann

Well in context may be that helpful to look at Philippians 4:12 reads, I know what it is to be in need. I know what it is to have plenty. I've learned the secret of being content in any and every circumstance, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. Then it says, verse 13. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. So in context, Paul is talking about that he is experiencing a variety of issues in his life. He's learned. He's experienced living in plenty. He's experienced living in want. He's experienced being well fed or hungry. He's saying that no matter what life throws at me, I can get by. I can serve Christ, I can do what God has called me to do. None of these things are going to hinder me from accomplishing God's purposes. So even here, Paul is not saying it's absolutely nothing that I can't

do. That I can, I can do everything in the world. Paul is saying God will give me the strength to continue to serve him no matter what circumstances I find myself in. And that's a very different meaning than how this verse is often used. And the idea that with Jesus on your side, you can do absolutely everything, so that's not what Philippians 4:13 means. I think that's important because we don't want to make rash decisions thinking we're able to accomplish something that are clearly outside of God's will for us. So that's Philippians 4:13. Jeff what's one that really stands out to you?

Jeff Laird

Philippians 4:13 is definitely one that comes up. That's one of those examples of something where people either over literalize or over simplify something in Scripture, where they're just trying to take a shallow view of it. Another one that that for me comes up constantly, all the time that I see is an example where what we're doing is we're taking a piece of Scripture and we're applying it more or less the way it was intended, but we're applying it to the wrong people. Yeah, we're taking something that was spoken to or given to a specific group and then we're trying to apply it all over the place. And this one is, like triggering is the term, for some people, because it's very common. I know people who've actually had this tattooed on themselves.

Jeff Laird

I'm sorry, but it's Jeremiah 29:11. And this is the verse that talks about how I know the plans that I have for you with the future and so on and so forth. It's very encouraging. That's very comforting. Problem is, it's just like Philippians doesn't mean, oh, I can win any contest, I can ace any test just because of this verse, Jeremiah 29:11 does not mean that, well, God is promising that he has safe, healthy, happy, relaxed circumstances for me in my future. It's very specifically targeted and what he's actually doing is he's telling the people of Israel. That he has a future for Israel, for the people. But even the people that he's speaking to, they're about to go into 70 years of exile. So even in the immediate context, God isn't saying I'm going to make all things great for you. What he's saying is this is going to be awful. This is going to be terrible. But I want you to remember that at the end of it, I have a plan, I have a purpose. I have something.

Jeff Laird

Now the general principle behind that is totally fine to apply. It's OK if we're going to talk about life in general and say things are difficult, things are hard. But hey, Jeremiah 29 was God telling Israel, I know it's going to be difficult, but I have a plan and a purpose for you. Verses like Romans will coordinate with something like that, but it's OK for us to say God is always in control. He always knows what's going on, but what we can't do is we can't take that particular verse and say yes, this is something that God has absolutely promised to everybody. That everybody is guaranteed to have some sort of happy, wonderful, positive experience. And that's a pretty common issue that we have with Scripture is taking verses and applying them to the wrong persons, or the wrong way or the wrong circumstances. There's another one of these in the Old Testament, Kevin, I think you were going to discuss this one, which was in Second Chronicles.

Kevin Stone

Uh yeah, Second Chronicles 7:14 is another one of those poster verses that you see on, you know, wall art a lot and see it on memes on the Internet and things. But it's a wonderful verse where I'll just read it

here Second Chronicles 7:14, if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. So wonderful promise there. But to whom was the promise given? That's what we need to take a look at in the context. This was a promise to Israel, the people who were living in God's promised land, God's covenant people in the Old Testament. They were under God's law and God said when you turn your backs on me in the future and you get yourselves into trouble. Then there's a remedy for that. I will take away that punishment. I will take away the discipline that you're receiving when you humble yourselves and turn from your wicked ways. When you repent and when you seek me with all your heart, there will be forgiveness available to you. I will restore you and your prosperity in the land. So a direct promise to Israel from God.

Kevin Stone

And where we go wrong sometimes is to take this as just a blanket promise to, well, to us. You know, we want America to be blessed. And so we take this promise and we say well, you know America has problems. America is facing some difficulties. But if God's, people will pray and humble themselves and turn from their wicked ways, calling the name of the Lord. He's going to heal our land. He's going to heal United States of America. He's going to bring us to a place of blessing and prosperity again. We'll know divine favor. And again, the principle holds true. We should be praying for our nation. We should be humbling ourselves. We should be turning from our wicked ways, right? But we don't have the precise promise that Israel had and the Jews under the Old Covenant had when they were given that they were in Second Chronicles 7 and verse 14. We just have to be careful. The principle might still apply, and we still do need to be seeking God's face. We don't have the promise of material blessing and prosperity that that Israel had.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, that's excellent, Kevin. I think I've heard that one quoted over the United States countless times as if this is a promise when God says if my people in context is referring to the nation of Israel. And like I said and like all of us said, is a general principle if a nation dedicates itself to God and operates itself in a way that honors and glorifies God. Yes, generally speaking, God does bless that nation. But this specific promise was to Israel. So could the principles apply? Yes. But does the specific promise apply? No, it doesn't. And I think a lot of these out of context versus are promises. Promises given to either a specific person or people in a specific context. Can we draw principles from that that apply to us either individually or corporately? Yes. But it's like me promising Jeff that I'm going to take him out for ice cream the next time he's in town. Doesn't necessarily apply to Kevin as much as I'm sure Kevin would like to go out for ice cream, too. You can't take a promise given to one person or people, and automatically assume that applies to every person or people, even though Shea's a pretty generous guy. He likes to take people out for ice cream. Well, yes, that's a general rule, but that's not a specific promise to every single person on the planet.

Jeff Laird

And I think a good example of that's right.

Kevin Stone

Ice cream for everybody.

Jeff Laird

I want to hold you to that too. A good example of how sometimes this happens is Shea, if you can imagine somebody if I took the podcast that we're doing right now and I clipped the audio where you said that next time Jeff's in town, I'm going to take him out for ice cream. And then every single time I come to the offices, I play that clip and say, see, this is what you said. Now they are words that were said, they are statements, but there's a broader context behind those, and that's where the context comes in. There's another one of these that is just perpetually abused. When we look at how people use the Bible. And it's really relevant today when we talk about defining the difference between what God does and doesn't want us to do. And that's Matthew 7:1. We have a comment that Jesus makes about not judging and if you just take that, that would be like me taking that clip of you and just pulling out that one little bit of audio and then just trying to use that all by itself. Yes, Jesus said those words. Don't judge. But the context of what he said he then goes on and he spends the rest of the chapter basically explaining the correct way to judge.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah.

Jeff Laird

It's more like somebody saying, you know, don't just rush out there and mow the grass. Do this and do this. Don't just run out there and and throw fire in the fire pit. Do this and do this. What Jesus is really doing is explaining how we're supposed to stay away from shallow, meaningless judgment. We're not supposed to use appearances. We're not supposed to use biases and preferences. He goes through an explanation of how he expects us to actually judge. And at the end of that, he says so judge with right judgment. And that's all the way down in the 24th verse. It's a long explanation. It's a long commentary that he gives.

Jeff Laird

In a sense you're right. Our first instinct is not supposed to be to rush to judgment. So we should be careful that we don't just immediately assume that we know what another person is thinking, or what they're feeling or what's going on. We need to accept the idea that I could be wrong. I don't know everything, I don't understand what's going on, but what I can't do is I can't just take that one little bit and try to blanket apply that to everything. Jesus is not saying, well, when somebody is doing something blatantly against God's will, you're just supposed to shake your head and go, well, who am I to judge? Now that's not exactly the way it's supposed to be. I shouldn't be overly judgmental. But the verse does not mean that I'm supposed to never judge under any circumstances for any reason. That is not the way that that is meant to work.

Jeff Laird

Now, that's a teaching and a command that's given specifically to Christians. Like that's the way we're supposed to operate, and that's the way that we're supposed to be. There again, you can take little clips and you can apply them to the wrong people in the wrong circumstances. You can do that in positive ways. You can do that in negative ways. I know, Kevin, you wanted to talk about Matthew Chapter 19. There's another example of something like that in there.

Kevin Stone

Yes. In Matthew 19, young man comes to Jesus, and he has he has a lot of wealth, Scripture says, and he has some questions for Jesus. And the the statement that Jesus makes that is often taken out of context and twisted to mean something that Jesus wasn't saying is in verse 21. So this is Matthew 19:21. Jesus answered, if you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. So some people take this verse, this statement that Jesus said and he actually said it. These are words from his mouth. But then they, they take this and they say, well, see, in order to be saved, you've got to, you've got to be poor. You cannot have any possessions. You've got to give them all away because that's what he says here. But then, you know, what's the context? What was Jesus doing in this passage?

Kevin Stone

And again, this was a young man who had come to Jesus. He had great wealth. We sometimes call him the rich young ruler, and he starts off by calling Jesus good. So they have a conversation about what goodness really means and who truly is good. You know how we define that term. And then they their conversation turns to the law. And the young man says, you know, I've, I've kept all the commandments. I have done at all. I from my youth up, you know I have always been living by the law and I'm I can't think of anything else that I, that I, that I need. I mean, what else can I do to inherit eternal life? What can I do, what can I do, what can I accomplish to get eternal life? And 'cause I've kept all the law. Now there's a problem right there in that he he thought that he had kept all the law. The law's purpose was to show us our inadequacy is to show us our sin that we cannot measure up. And so he was, he was blind in some area.

Kevin Stone

Well, Jesus knew exactly where he was blind. Jesus puts his finger right on it. He says, OK, you've kept all the law, that's your position. You go sell everything you have, give it to the poor and come and follow me and immediately the young man was saddened, Scripture says. And he turned, and he walked away from his Savior, because he couldn't do that. He loved money more than he loved God. And Jesus, Jesus brilliantly leads him to this place where he showed this young man who his idol was. His idol was Mammon. Idol was money. And he couldn't part with that and he chose, he chose his possessions over Jesus. And so that's the point that Jesus is making to this young man. He's not making a blanket statement that everybody has to sell everything in order to have heaven. He's saying to this man, this is what's standing in your way. This is what you need to do. You need to love me more than all of these possessions and the young man just couldn't do it.

Jeff Laird

To me that is really critical that we explain that particular one, because I think on one hand we we over specified that Jesus was speaking about money. But I think another thing that we do that we that we misinterpret the verse is we fail to realize that Jesus is giving a blanket teaching, which is that idea that if there is something in your life that you are not willing to part with or give up for God's sake, then you are not really, truly following God. That is some sort of an idol. And there again, that factors into a lot of conversations we have today about what it means to be a believer. And that could be money, that could be fame, that could be health, that could be sex, that could be anything. And if a person's attitude is to

say, well, I'm not going to set my preferences aside on that particular thing. That's exactly what the rich young ruler did. It's not specific to money, it's a general principle in that sense. And when we read the passage and we just go, oh well, Jesus said you have to be poor. We're doubly missing the point of what he's trying to say and what he's trying to teach us.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent point. I think over the years we've received questions about the rich young ruler passage multiple times to the point of Jesus here, teaching works salvation. That you have to do these things in order to be saved and way Kevin described it as you need to give up what's standing your way, what you're holding onto, instead of Christ. That's crucially important to realize anything. It's studied in context. I think that becomes clear. Probably another one that really stands out to me is Romans 8:28, for for two reasons, one from more personal perspective of people using it to comfort someone who's had something horrible happen to them. Oh well, God works all things together for good, which is an entirely true statement and actually does apply. But that may or may not be what that person needs to hear at that exact moment. It's maybe, this is a conversation later to have with them, but often when people go through a time of suffering or have had a experienced a tragedy a theological reminder that God is in control and that will work this out for good, while true, may not be the most comforting message.

Shea Houdmann

So it's a word of caution to be careful when you use that verse, but then even studied in context Romans 8:28 in full, let me read it, and we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good. For those who are called according to his purpose. And so people will take this verse and say, well, God works everything together for good, and by good they often define it as like my good. Like good as in what I want. OK, well yeah, I'm going through a tough time now, but God is going to use this ultimately to bring me all the stuff that I want or I have to go through this time of trial before I get to experience God's blessings in this life. Well, in context, verses 29 and 30 talk about, for those whom God foreknew he pre destined to be conformed to the image of his Son, and then later those he also predestine, yeah so-called justified. Those he justified he glorified. So the in context the good that God is bringing about verse 28 is us being one conformed to the image of the son and 2nd being glorified, arriving in heaven, receiving our glorified bodies.

Shea Houdmann

That's not how most people understand this verse. They tend to think of it in a temporary right now sort of situation and that God will work this bad situation and turn into something good for me in this life. And while that very well may happen in context Romans 8:28 is talking about the good is going to bring about is are being conformed to the image of Christ. Being glorified in his presence in heaven when we seek Christ as He is. So that's a very different meaning than how this verse is applied. But even with that said, I think it's important for us to remember that even in this life, God often does take a tragedy, something bad, a trial, suffering, and bring it about for good purposes even in this life. But in the context of Romans 8:28, that's not what he's talking about. It's talking about God bringing it working together for good for our eternal good, and being conformed to the image of Christ. Not necessarily something in this life.

Jeff Laird

That's a hard lesson for us to learn and to remember. But you know this we do see a theme in a lot of these these misconceptions that we're trying to we're trying to tweak things so that we get things a little bit more the way that we want them, the way that we see them. A quick example I can think of another one, John 14:13-14, Jesus says, ask anything in my name. You know, I call that the cosmic vending machine concept, where again, we're missing the concept that it's the context of in my name. Jesus doesn't say I'm just going to give you anything you want because you ask for it. It's a context in there that we have to be careful of.

Kevin Stone

Another one that can get you into a lot of trouble is Luke 10 and verse 19. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy. Nothing will harm you. So there's a wonderful promise. You know I've got I I am invincible, right? And I can go look for the snakes and the scorpions, and nothing in any enemy does to me is going to have any effect on me. But Jesus said this to whom? He said it to the 70 or the 72 that he was sending out for a specific mission, for a specific time. And their job was to go from village to village to prepare the way for the physical coming of the Lord and he they were to not take any any extra suitcase with them, no change of clothing. They were to stay in one house the whole time they were in the village. They had all these instructions and then God said God. Gave them power over over demons and these, you know, snakes and scorpions, which is probably the figurative referenced to demons there. And and he gave them that authority. And then they when they were done, they reported back to him, told him about all the events that had taken place and their mission was over.

Kevin Stone

So I cannot apply this to myself. I cannot go out into the world and say, hey, I'm ready to take on all the demons. I've got power over them, because I'm not part of the 70 or the 72. I I have not been told by Jesus to go out to various villages and prepare the way for Jesus physical coming. I have not been told not to take a suitcase and not to take a change of clothes, and I have not been given power over the the demons. If I run into a spiritual enemy in this world, I'm going to get on my knees and I'm going to pray, and I'm not going to rely on a promise taken out of context here.

Shea Houdmann

Maybe one more that I hear a lot, and again we're not questioning motives of anyone who's using these but Matthew 18:20 which says where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. And it's often used to mean we get two or three Christians together, God is especially present with them and will answer their prayer requests. Or two or three Christians praying together have more power than one Christian praying individually. Well, in context we just read the preceding verses. If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault just between the two you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they do not listen, take one or two others along so that every matter will be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church, and they refuse to listen to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly, I tell you what ever will be bound on Earth, will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on Earth will be loosed in heaven again. Truly I tell you that if two of you agree on anything and ask for it. It will be done

for them by my father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I with them.

Shea Houdmann

So in this context, two or three comes up multiple times and just talking about essentially confronting a believer who is sinned, resulting in if the believer does not respond to the two or three witnesses confronting him or her, that takes it to the church, and if it does, the person still refuses to respond to the church, then church discipline is enacted. The God is saying that when believers confront someone in this manner, God is with them. God is the one who is leading the discipline process. That if the church has come to an agreement that this disbeliever is sinning. And needs to be rebuked. There needs to be repentance in this life. If he's not responding, God is in agreement with the church. So again, the principle is there value to two to three Christians praying together in agreement on person? Of course there is. But in context, this is talking about church discipline. It's not talking about a church prayer meeting. It's not talking about if you really want to get your prayer answered, you need to get two or three people to agree with you. That's not what this verse means in the context at all. But again, Bible. There's many other verses that talk about the importance of praying for one another and praying together. So there is value in group prayer, but just it's not draw it from Matthew 18:20. But that's not what the verse is talking about.

Shea Houdmann

So hope is we've gone through some of the examples that over the 20 years at Got Questions of people asking us these things and quoting these scriptures in ways that it's taking out of context. Hope this conversations we pointed you in a different direction. I heard someone say once never read a Bible verse and by that the statement is never reading just one Bible verse. Always read the verses coming before and after to make sure how you're using that verse, how you're interpreting it fits with how it's actually intended to be used in the context. So whenever you hear someone saying, well, you're taking that out of context, that's what it means. It's you want to understand any single verse or group of verses in the overall context of whether we're talking about. That's why on bibleref.com, for example, our by verse by verse Bible commentary site, every single page is based on a single verse. It also has the context. Here's what it means in the immediate context. Here's what it means in the context of the entire chapter. 'cause we don't want people just studying one individual verse, we want them to study the verse in context. We can study the entire chapter, because the surrounding verses often have a huge impact on how even one single verse is interpreted.

Jeff Laird

That's right. It's one of the fundamental things that we want to try to encourage people in Bible study to avoid these kinds of mistakes is exactly that.

Shea Houdmann

So keep studying God's word and you find a verse. There are versus where you can quote just one single verse and it means exactly what it means. I'd quote maybe John 3:16 is an example. The context helps, but John 3:16 is pretty self-contained in its overall message. You can quote that verse and not be afraid you're taking it out of context. But a lot of these other examples, the way that we often use these verses, it doesn't really fit how they mean in the original writings. They don't doesn't fit with the

preceding and after verses. So study God's word in context. That is the best way to approach God's word. That's how God had the original writers. He didn't just give a collection of individual verses spread all over place, all on their own, no, he had inspired he, God breathed scripture to be studied as a whole, not as single verses. So hope our conversation today has been encouraging and edifying to you. This has been the Got Questions podcast on why we shouldn't take verses out of context. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.