

HEART AND SOUL: BIBLICAL STUDIES

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Biblical Hermeneutics 101

For I know the plans I have for you, ' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' ” (Jer. 29:11).

This verse is commonly quoted at high school graduations and chosen by many Christian young people as their “theme” verse. It is popularly understood to mean that God has a wonderful plan for each of our lives. As a result, if we remain within His will, we can expect great things from God in the future.

Sounds nice, doesn't it? The only problem is this verse says nothing of the sort. In fact, it means something totally different.

The passage is actually part of a letter the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Israelites who had been taken into captivity in Babylon. In that letter Jeremiah tells the exiles to settle into their new homes because they were going to be there for a long time—70 years, to be exact. This is immediately followed by verse 11, in which the Israelites are reassured of God's plan to bless their nation in the future.

Clearly Jeremiah 29:11 does not originally promise individual Christians today that God has a wonderful plan for each of their lives. Rather, it was first a promise to the exiled Israelites about God's long-term plans for their nation. In fact, the initial recipients understood that they were unlikely to personally benefit, as they would almost certainly be dead in 70 years.

This should be obvious to anyone who takes the time to read this passage in its context. In fact, some might wonder how it is that so many well-meaning Christians have interpreted this verse as they have. The answer is actually quite simple.

The Importance of Context

There are two key reasons this and other passages of Scripture are often misunderstood by Christians. The first is the all-too-common tendency to overlook context. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines context as “the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning.” In other words, it is important to avoid falling into the trap of reading Bible passages in isolation.

Incidentally, the same principle also holds true for nonbiblical writings. Suppose a friend were to tell you that he has discovered the true meaning of the classic children's tale *The Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. With great excitement your friend explains that the main point of this story is to encourage parents to have only one child. After all, there was only one baby bear in the story, and Goldilocks appears to have been an only child herself. Thus the story serves as a reminder to parents that one-child families are the best option for everyone.

Before you can object, your friend is quick to point out that he is quoting accurately from the story. After all, there really is only one baby bear in the story, and it definitely does seem as though Goldilocks is an only child. Since his facts are correct, on what basis can you reject his interpretation?

Of course, the answer is obvious: his interpretation violates the context of *The Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. A straightforward reading of the entire story makes it clear that the number of children in the bear family is a relatively trivial fact. Only by reading the entire story in context is it possible to get an accurate understanding of its key theme, which has nothing to do with the number of children in a family.

As noted earlier, context explains why we should not interpret Jeremiah 29:11 as a guarantee of personal prosperity to individual believers today. It's also the reason we don't indiscriminately combine Matthew 27:5 ("Then he went and hanged himself") with Luke 10:37 ("Go and do likewise"). This may be an accurate quotation of Scripture, but it certainly is not the proper use of these passages!

We can learn from Jabez by emulating his example of faithfulness to God, not by mindlessly reciting the words from his prayer.

The disregard of context is one of the key reasons some religious groups do such a poor job of expositing Scripture. They cherry-pick verses to support their arguments but overlook the clear meaning of these same verses in their proper context.

For example, Jehovah's Witnesses adamantly hold to the belief that Jesus is a created being and is not the second member of the Trinity. As a result, they grasp on to verses such as John 14:28 ("The Father is greater than I"), but overlook the way in which the apostle John upholds the full divinity of Jesus throughout his Gospel, beginning with the very first verse. We can understand who Jesus is only if we are willing to read the verses about Him in their proper context.

This is why it is risky to base our doctrines on isolated proof texts. When it comes to the state of the dead, many Christians fall into the trap of citing Paul's "desire to depart and be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23) as proof that our souls continue living after death. However, this isolated text needs to be properly weighed against Paul's lengthy exposition on the importance of the bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. In this section Paul makes it abundantly clear that a future bodily resurrection, not a present disembodied existence as a soul, is the reason we can have confidence that deceased believers have not perished in their sins.

Thus it is important to examine verses in their immediate context and figure out how they relate to the other parts of the Bible.

Understanding Cultural Context

However, there is more to a proper understanding of context than simply reading the words that appear before and after a particular passage. In fact, Merriam-Webster adds a second part to its definition of context: "The interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs." In other words, it is important to understand the historical and cultural background in which a passage is written. This can be thought of as cultural context.

To illustrate, let's go back to Jeremiah 29:11. As noted earlier, many Christians interpret this verse as a personal guarantee of prosperity for their lives today. This happens because our Western culture places a high value on individuality. We strongly emphasize independence and freedom of choice for everyone. So when we come across a passage like Jeremiah 29:11, it seems tailor-made for our desire to have God bless each of our individual lives.

But as E. Randolph Richards and Brandon O'Brien note in their book *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes*, this is not the cultural context Jeremiah lived in. Ancient Israelite culture placed a much

stronger emphasis on the good of the collective as opposed to the individual. For example, the “you” in Jeremiah 29:11 was plural rather than singular. As a result, people at that time would have interpreted God’s promise as one to their entire nation rather than for their individual lives.

“If God meant each Israelite individually, then the promise is nonsense before the words are fully out of God’s mouth. We must teach every new student that the ‘plans to prosper you’ involved the killing and enslavement of thousands of individual Israelites, who might dispute the promise ‘not to harm you,’ ” explain Richards and O’Brien.

The Western emphasis on individualism is also largely responsible for the “Prayer of Jabez” phenomenon among North American Christians. In 2000 Bruce Wilkinson’s *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* was published and quickly became an evangelical best seller. In this book Wilkinson claimed that an obscure prayer found in 1 Chronicles 4:10 could transform the lives of Christians and lead to great blessings from God. All they needed to do was regularly repeat the prayer of Jabez.

However, it is highly unlikely that the author of Chronicles intended for this passage to be used in this way. Instead of providing a guarantee of health and wealth to anyone fortunate enough to discover this verse hidden within a set of genealogical data, this passage records the actions of a member of the tribe of Judah who acted more honorably than his brothers. We can learn from Jabez by emulating his example of faithfulness to God, not by mindlessly reciting the words from his prayer.

Incidentally, when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, Jesus did not get them to recite the prayer of Jabez. Rather, Jesus taught them what we now call the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13). The first few lines focus on God’s place in heaven, His holy name, and His coming kingdom. Only after that are we to ask for our daily bread. The focus is on God, not our individual wants and desires.

Reading the Bible Properly

As we have seen, understanding context, both linguistic and cultural, is integral to a proper understanding of Scripture. This is no easy task, but is still something we have to do.

One of the best ways to develop an understanding of context is to regularly read the Bible in its entirety. By immersing ourselves in God’s Word, we become equipped to discern truth from error. Instead of limiting our Bible reading to isolated passages or favorite books, we must leave no section unread. This way we will always read each verse in light of the rest of the Bible.

In addition, we are fortunate to have access to many high-quality Bible dictionaries and commentaries. They provide a wealth of information, not only about how to interpret difficult passages, but about the culture the Bible writers lived in. *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* is a great place to start, as it was put together by some of the church’s foremost experts.

Finally, we must always approach the Bible with a humble and teachable spirit and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. The Bible is God’s Word, and we should listen to what God has to say to us through it, even if it isn’t always what we want to hear. In contrast, using the Bible to prove a preconceived point or settle an argument is a surefire path to misinterpretation.

There is too much at stake for us to waste time misinterpreting the Bible. Carefully reading Scripture will not only help us listen to the God of Scripture—it will also inspire us to share its truths with others.

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