

## PROBLEMS IN INTERPRETATION

The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the “plain meaning of the text.” And the most important ingredient one brings to this task is enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text. Correct interpretation, therefore, brings relief to the mind as well as a prick or prod to the heart.

The need to interpret is also to be found by noting what goes on around us all the time. A simple look at the contemporary church, for example, makes it abundantly clear that not all “plain meanings” are equally plain to all. It is of more than passing interest that most of those in today’s church who argue that women should keep silent in church on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 at the same time deny the validity of speaking in tongues and prophecy, the very context in which the “silence” passage occurs. And those who affirm on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 that women as well as men should pray and prophesy usually deny that women must do so with their heads covered. For some, the Bible “plainly teaches” believers’ baptism by immersion; others believe they can make a biblical case for infant baptism. Both “eternal security” and the possibility of “losing one’s salvation” are preached in the church, but never by the same person! Yet both are affirmed as the plain meaning of biblical texts.

Even among more theologically orthodox people, however, many strange ideas manage to gain acceptance in various quarters. For example, one of the current rages among American Protestants, especially charismatics, is the so-called wealth and health gospel. The “good news” is that God’s will for you is financial and material prosperity! One of the advocates of this “gospel” begins his book by arguing for the “plain sense” of Scripture and claiming that he puts the Word of God first and foremost throughout his study. He says that it is not what we think it says but what it actually says that counts. The “plain meaning” is what he is after. But one begins to wonder what the “plain meaning” really is when financial prosperity is argued as the will of God from such a text as 3 John 2, “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (KJV)—a text that in fact has nothing at all to do with financial prosperity.

## INTERPRETING THE EPISTLES

Despite this variety of kinds, however, there is one thing that all of the epistles have in common, and this is the crucial thing to note in reading and interpreting them: **They are all what are technically called occasional documents (i.e., arising out of and intended for a specific occasion), and they are all from the first century. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belonging to all time, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is precisely these factors—that they are occasional and that they belong to the first century—that make their interpretation difficult at times.**

Above all else, their occasional nature must be taken seriously. This means that they were occasioned, or called forth, by some special circumstance, either from the reader’s side or the author’s. Almost all of the New Testament letters were occasioned from the reader’s side (Philemon and perhaps James and Romans are exceptions). **Usually the occasion was some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.**

**Most of our problems in interpreting epistles are due to this fact of their being occasional. We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were—or even if there was**

**a problem.** It is much like listening to one end of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out who is on the other end and what that unseen party is saying. Yet in many cases it is especially important for us to try to hear “the other end” so that we know what our passage is a response to.”

One further point here. The occasional nature of the epistles also means that they are not first of all theological treatises, nor are they summaries of Paul’s or Peter’s theology. There is theology implied, but it is always “task theology”—theology being written for or brought to bear on the task at hand. This is true even of Romans, which is a fuller and more systematic statement of Paul’s theology than one finds elsewhere. But it is only some of his theology; in this case it is theology born out of his own special task as apostle to the Gentiles. It is his special struggle for Jew and Gentile to become one people of God, based on grace alone and apart from the law, that causes the discussion to take the special form it does in Romans and that causes “justification” to be used there as the primary metaphor for salvation. After all, the word “justify,” which predominates in Romans (fifteen times) and Galatians (eight times), occurs only two other times in all of Paul’s other letters (1 Cor 6:11; Titus 3:7).

Thus one will go to the Epistles again and again for Christian theology; they are loaded with it. But one must always keep in mind that they were not primarily written to expound Christian theology. It is always theology applied to or directed toward a particular need. We will note the implications of this for hermeneutics in our next chapter.

## **INTERPRETING PSALMS**

The difficulty with interpreting the psalms arises primarily from their nature—what they are. Because the Bible is God’s Word, **many Christians automatically assume that all it contains are words from God to people. Thus they fail to recognize that the Bible also contains words spoken to God or about God—which is what the psalms do**—and that these words, too, are God’s Word. That is, because psalms are basically prayers and hymns, by their very nature they are addressed to God or express truth about God in song.

This reality presents us with a unique problem of hermeneutics in Scripture. How do these words spoken to God function as a Word from God to us? Since they are not propositions or imperatives or stories that get us in touch with God’s Story, they do not function primarily for the teaching of doctrine or moral behavior. Yet they are profitable when used for the purposes intended by God, who inspired them, by helping us to express ourselves to God and to consider his ways. The psalms, therefore, are of great benefit to the believer who looks to the Bible for help in expressing joys and sorrows, successes and failures, hopes and regrets.

### **The Psalms as Poetry**

The most important thing to remember in reading or interpreting psalms is that they are poems—musical poems. We have already briefly discussed the nature of Hebrew poetry in the preceding chapter, but there are three additional points that need to be made in connection with Psalms.

1. Hebrew poetry, by its very nature, was addressed to the mind through the heart (i.e., much of the language is intentionally emotive). Therefore, one must be careful not to “overexegete” psalms by finding special meanings in specific words or phrases where the poet may have intended none. For example, you will recall that the nature of Hebrew poetry always involves some form of parallelism and

that one common form is that called synonymous parallelism (where the second line repeats or reinforces the sense of the first line; see Synonymous parallelism). In this type of parallelism, the two lines together express the poet's meaning; and the second line is not trying to say some new or different thing. Consider, for example, the opening of Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

“Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they display knowledge.

The poet's point in plain prose is, “God is revealed in his creation, especially in the heavenly bodies.” But our plain-prose sentence is colorless next to the magnificent poetry of the psalm, which both says it better and in a more memorable way. Note that the four lines are not trying to say four different things, although the second set adds the new idea that during both the day and the night the heavens reveal their maker. But in the first set the psalmist is not trying to say that the “heavens” do one thing and the “skies” another; together the two lines speak of one glorious reality.

### **How the Parables Function**

The best clues as to what the parables are is to be found in their function. In contrast to most of the parabolic sayings, such as not reaping figs from thistles, the story parables do not serve to illustrate Jesus' prosaic teaching with word pictures. Nor are they told to serve as vehicles for revealing truth—although they end up clearly doing that. **Rather the story parables function as a means of calling forth a response on the part of the hearer. In a sense, the parable itself is the message. It is told to address and capture the hearers, to bring them up short about their own actions, or to cause them to respond in some way to Jesus and his ministry.**

Similarly with the Prodigal Son. The context is the Pharisees' murmuring over Jesus' acceptance of and eating with the wrong kind of people (Luke 15:1–2). The three parables of lost things that follow are Jesus' justification of his actions. In the parable of the lost son there are just three points of reference—the father and his two sons. Here again, where one sat determined how one heard, but in either case the point is the same: God not only freely forgives the lost but accepts them with great joy. Those who consider themselves righteous reveal themselves to be unrighteous if they do not share the father's and the lost son's joy.

Jesus' table companions, of course, will identify with the lost son, as all of us well should. But this is not the real force of the parable, which is to be found in the attitude of the second son. He was “always with” the father, yet he had put himself on the outside. He failed to share the father's heart with its love for a lost son. As a friend recently put it, “Can you imagine anything worse than coming home and falling into the hands of the older brother?”

Excerpt From: Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart. “How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth.” Zondervan

## HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

*a few definitions:*

<i>hermeneutics</i>	The study of the methodology of interpretation
<i>exegesis</i>	Explanation of a text
<i>pericope</i>	A selection from a book
<i>paragraph</i>	Subdivision of a written composition that deals with one idea <sup>1</sup>

*a few quotations:*

“The aim of good interpretation is not uniqueness. The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get to the plain meaning of the text.”

“The first task of the interpreter is called *exegesis*. Exegesis is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning.... It is the attempt to hear the Word as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was *the original intention of the Bible*.”

“The big issue among Christians committed to Scripture as God’s Word has to do with the problems of cultural relativity, what is cultural and therefore belongs to the first century alone and what transcends culture and is thus a Word for all seasons.” <sup>2</sup>

“... Personal Bible study has a very specific aim-namely, life-change.... I propose a three-step approach that will guarantee life-change...

1. **Observation** In this step you ask and answer the question, *What do I see?*
2. **Interpretation** Here you ask and answer the question, *What does it mean?*
3. **Application** Here you ask and answer the question, *How does it work?*<sup>3</sup>

“Inductive Bible study uses the Bible itself as the primary source of information about the Bible”

“One of the most important principles of handling the Word properly and studying the Bible inductively is to interpret Scripture in the light of its context.”

“For example, 2 Tim. 2:16 says, ‘...avoid worldly and empty chatter....’ Does this mean that Christians should not tell funny stories or talk about the mundane things of the world? A careful examination of the text will shed light on the meaning of the statement and show that the subject being considered is the gospel and the need to handle it accurately, not whether or not a Christian should tell funny stories. Never take a Scripture out of its context to make it say something that is contrary to the text.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*

<sup>2</sup> *How To Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

<sup>3</sup> *Living By The Book*

<sup>4</sup> *How to Study Your Bible*

# 'God Is Not a Genie in a Bottle': Ways We Misuse the Bible

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/april/misusing-the-bible.html>

Why Eric J. Bargerhuff says we must avoid twisting Bible verses for our own advantage.

Interview by Owen Strachan/ April 18, 2012

What does the text mean to me?

This question, asked in Bible studies and sermons around the world, can lead believers to spiritual renewal. When it is the only question Christians ask of the Bible, warns Eric J. Bargerhuff, faith in Christ can become disconnected from the meaning of given passages. In [The Most Misused Verses in the Bible: Surprising Ways God's Word Is Misunderstood](#) (Bethany House), Bargerhuff, until recently a Florida pastor, advocates careful interpretation of Scripture based on attention to context. Owen Strachan, Christian theology and church history professor at Boyce College, spoke with Bargerhuff about how the Bible becomes a mere handbook, and its verses a talisman, when our desires crowd out sound interpretive practices.

Are there specific categories of verses that evangelicals tend to misinterpret?

Our temptation is to interpret the promises of God materially and temporally instead of spiritually and eternally. We Americans have bought into a materialistic, right-now mindset, and so we're tempted to pull verses out of context to fit that mindset. We need to understand that God's greatest desire is to glorify his name. Too often, we interpret God's promises in a way that is appealing to our sinful side. We often grab things out of Scripture and try to use them for our own benefit, instead of taking the necessary steps to submit to Scripture, to be humbled by it.

You critique prayers that uncritically expect God to grant us, well, anything. Like John 14:13: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

God is not a genie in a bottle. Yes, he has a good, pleasing, and perfect will. But this doesn't mean we should pray for whatever we want. We are sinful people and don't even know what's best for us, as the Book of Romans says. Sometimes we pray with wrong motives. Praying random prayers that are self-centered is not God-honoring. We should seek his will when we pray.

What would you say to athletes who latch onto Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all this through him who gives me strength")?

In that passage, Paul is teaching on contentment and arguing that no matter what our situation is, we should learn to be content. The ability to be content, whatever the situation, is contingent on what Jesus gives us. This verse doesn't necessarily mean that Jesus will give the player victory, but rather that he can be content either way because of God's strength in him. It's not about God giving you the strength to dunk the basketball as much as it is him working in you to be content no matter what happens in the game.

Why is Jeremiah 29:11-13 ("For I know the plans I have for you ...") commonly misinterpreted?

Most people overlook the context of the verse because it speaks to what they want to hear for their life. This was a corporate promise given to the nation of Israel, to a generation that came out of 70 years of captivity in Babylon. We think through an Americanized filter based on our preconceived notions of what blessing is. But God's promises are spiritual promises, not promises of instant gratification. Though God does bless us in many ways, he has not promised us our best life now. This world is not our home, and we should long for a better country.

Is there a danger, when reading Acts 2:38 ("Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'"), of thinking that baptism is a precondition of salvation?

This was a specific command given to a specific group of people who were to *express* their salvation through baptism. There is a difference between the *means* of salvation and an *obedient response* to salvation. Baptism was an expression of what had already happened in the heart. Baptism was not to be linked with salvation, because that would make salvation the product of a specific action, contradicting the teaching that salvation comes through faith, not works.

What principles can guide careful interpretation of Scripture?

There are several: understanding the Bible's various literary genres, understanding historical context, discerning the author's intent, carefully defining the meaning of words, looking at grammatical relationships, reflecting on the church's history of interpretation, and always adhering to the principle that the Bible never contradicts itself. These elements are very important to understanding what Bible passages really mean. There are plenty of resources today—Bible dictionaries, commentaries, lexicons, and more—to help ordinary Christians gain a better understanding.

Could evangelicals ever become so focused on getting texts exactly right that they end up debating how many angels can dance on a pin?

Anyone who engages the study of mathematics or architecture knows that even one slightly off-balance angle can distort the whole picture. Theologians who are trying to build an overview of what the Bible says know that we have to get things right. Satan, in the garden, twisted the Word of God ever so slightly. We must understand that God has embodied his will and his nature in these texts. If we skew them even ever so slightly, we will misunderstand him.

Go to [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com) for "Misusing the Bible," a Bible study based on this article.

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# How To Completely Misuse The Bible In 5 Easy Steps

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/how-to-completely-misuse-the-bible-in-5-easy-steps/>

April 22, 2014 by Benjamin L. Corey

The Bible is a notoriously difficult book (collection of books, actually) to understand. We've been wrestling with the meaning and implication of various texts within the Bible nearly since the moment it was written.

Every generation of Christians has the challenge of not only understanding the Bible, but also has the challenge of contextualizing the message to a specific time and place. However, even though studying the Bible with a heart for understanding the message is difficult, it is the most beautiful journey I've ever set out on. The richness found within this text is enough to occupy multiple lifetimes— and is something that I've quite honestly, grown addicted to.

On that same note however, with the Bible being so difficult to understand, it is also easy to completely misuse it. Such a misuse, even done unintentionally, distorts the beauty of what actually lies inside. We've all seen it. In fact, we've all done it.

Ultimately, misusing the Bible is destructive regardless of the intent of the one misusing it. If you and I are going to continue on in this quest of helping our generation find more beautiful and emerging ways of expressing the message of scripture to our culture, we'll need to break ourselves of this horrible habit.

In order to help out, I— your faithful traveling companion— have put together a handy-dandy list of how you too, can misuse the Bible in just five easy steps:

## **1. Just start quoting Old Testament rules when you want to govern someone's behavior.**

Who cares if the Mosaic law was given to a nomadic tribe some 3,000 years ago— just pick one of the ancient rules they lived by and quote it whenever you need to win an argument with someone.

I remember when I got my first tattoo— I was just a teenager and somehow was able to get one by showing the old man at the tattoo shop my high school ID and saying "I'm 18, I swear". (That aspect of what I did was totally wrong, by the way, but just keeping it authentic). Let's just say, when I sported my new tattoo at Youth Group, the night went south pretty quickly. The youth leaders were totally kind and loving, but one of the other teens had a full on meltdown over it. I literally (not making this up) had to leave early while he chased me to my car, screaming "YOU SHALL NOT TATTOO YOURSELF, I AM THE LORD!!!!" as he waved a Bible at me. He was reaaaaallly angry.

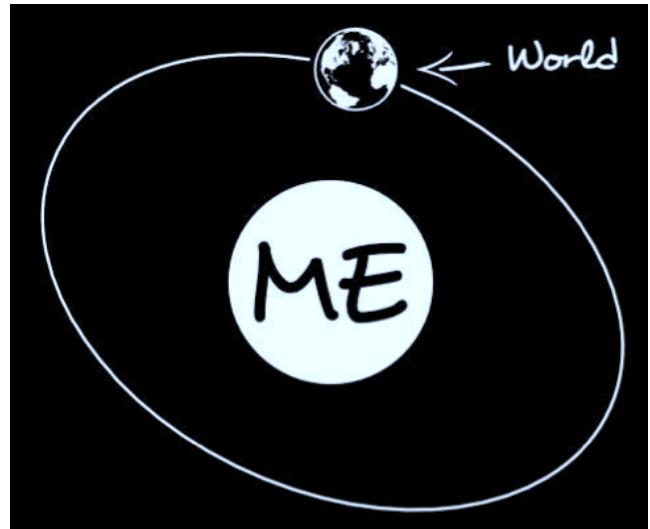
Here's the deal: the Old Testament is a large collection of books. Some of them are "historic narrative" and are designed to tell us the story of our ancestors. Some contain detailed sets of laws they lived by that cover everything from managing a menstrual cycle to how *not* to cook a goat. While these texts are some of my favorite in the Bible, this part of the Bible was NOT intended to be used as a rule book for here and now (unless we all want out-of-control sideburns). In fact, the New Testament teaches this very clearly.

It you're picking an arbitrary rule out of this section of the Bible (especially with the motivation of applying it to "the other") you are misusing the Bible.

## 2. Assume the Bible is all about YOU.

Again, who cares if these books (66 of them) were written to multiple different cultures, times, and places— it's a book that's all about you, right?

Not so much. Yes, it is a book that God has provided for us, and I do believe it is inspired, but that doesn't mean we can just lift things out of context and blindly assume they were written all about us. As Americans, we do this every graduation season when we go to buy a graduation card for our beloved graduate. Which verse is on almost EVERY one of those cards? I don't even have to tell you, because I think you already know— Jeremiah 29:11.



“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.”

It's a beautiful verse. The problem? It wasn't written for graduation cards as a promise to give fine young Americans a bright career, but was a promise that God would bring Israel out of their captivity. Now, this doesn't mean I don't believe God has “good” plans— I remind my daughter constantly that God has a plan for her life. What it does mean however, is that as with the first principle, we can't simply lift things from the Old Testament and use them in isolation. Whether we're using it to demoralize “the other” or prop ourselves up, it's still a gross misuse of scripture.

We do this with a lot of verses, and in the case of Revelation, we do it with an entire book. We must remember that this book was written for us, but not always *to* or *about* us. To view it as otherwise would be a very self-centered approach to understanding scripture.

## 3. Attempt to arrive at meaning without first understanding the culture it was written to.

In hermeneutics we often say that the “primary meaning of scripture is whatever it meant to the original audience”. This is a principle we so quickly forget when interpreting both Old and New Testaments. Consider this by way of illustration:

Recently one of my mates moved into an old farmhouse. While he was doing some repair work to a wall, he reached inside and found a box of old letters that were written by a child who lived on the farm during the Great Depression. In order to really dissect and understand the letters, one needs to understand the world they were written in, and the parties involved. There's an overarching culture, a specific family, even a specific town, all of which gives the text context... there are endless factors to consider in order to truly understand those letters.

This is the same situation we find ourselves in with the Bible, especially the New Testament which is mostly a collection of letters written by Paul of Tarsus. We cannot even begin to understand what these letters *could mean* for us until we understand what they actually *did mean* to Paul who wrote them, and what they meant to the specific recipients who first read them.



We also really blow this one with the book of Revelation. For some strange reason, American Christians think that this was a book written about *our* time, when the book itself teaches differently. This was a book written to encourage 7 specific churches, so whatever it meant, it was meant *primarily* for those seven churches. The idea that John would write a letter to 7 specific churches that was exclusively about what would happen 2,000 years later, is pretty poor hermeneutics.

One cannot understand the Bible in true depth, until they understand the people and culture who wrote it, as well as the people and culture who it was written to.

#### **4. Discount the fact that it wasn't originally written in English.**

This is a tricky principle to navigate because you can in fact, understand a vast majority of what the Bible teaches simply by reading it in English. However, one cannot discount the fact that it was not written in English— biblical languages must always play a *serious consideration* in the development of theology and the interpretation of texts.

Whenever one translates a document from one language to the next, they run into issues of translation. Regarding the New Testament specifically, we run into this issue because not all words or phrases in Greek will translate cleanly into English. Many words in Greek have multiple meanings, each of which carries nuance that can impact how we theologically interpret a given passage. Other times, we encounter idioms that don't always translate precisely. This is the challenge we encounter in the translation process— translation cannot always express the original thought in the exact same way it was originally expressed.

Where we misuse scripture in this regard, is when we hold hard and fast to a specific interpretation of a specific passage in English without consideration to biblical languages. No, you don't have to go learn them (trust me, it's not a pleasant experience) but what it does require is holding our interpretation of a passage in humility, and with an open hand as we consult the original language.

#### **5. Let it point you to anything other than Jesus.**

In the book of John, Jesus tells the religious leaders that although they know scripture cold, they've missed the most important aspect— that all scripture points to him! Also, early in his ministry he tells a parable of a wise and foolish man who are both building a house. The wise man, who is centered on the teachings of Jesus, is compared to a man who chose stone as a foundation while the foolish man (who neglected the teachings of Jesus) is compared to someone who built their house on sand. Finally, in the last hours of his life, Jesus reminded his disciples that he “was the way, the truth, and the life”. According to Jesus, this thing we're doing— and the book we read— is all about him.

As we read the Bible, we must remember that it's all about Jesus and designed to point us towards Jesus. We must interpret everything in light of Jesus, and we must allow it to form us to be more *like* Jesus. If one allows the Bible to point them to anything other than Jesus of Nazareth, it is a misuse of scripture.

So read it, humbly try to understand the context, hold interpretations with humility, and let the words point you to the main character of the story— Jesus.

*Yes, the Bible can be a complex set of documents to understand, and is easily misused. However, I think if we'll be conscious of these 5 ways we too often unintentionally misuse and misread the scriptures, we'll find ourselves on a trajectory that might be more exciting than anything we had previously anticipated.*

Read more: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/formerlyfundie/how-to-completely-misuse-the-bible-in-5-easy-steps/#ixzz3GEDrAdjm>

April 1, 2014

# Five Bible Verses You Need to Stop Misusing

That verse you keep quoting? It may not mean what you think it means.

by Ben Irwin

<http://www.faithstreet.com/onfaith/2014/04/01/five-bible-verses-you-need-to-stop-misusing/31534>

The other day, someone gave me a note with Nahum 1:7 printed at the top: “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.” For some reason, they neglected to include the next line, which continues the thought from verse 7: “But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of Nineveh.”

Okay, so maybe the fuller version doesn’t deliver quite the same Hallmark moment. And maybe that’s the problem with how many Christians use the Bible.

Christians read (and quote) Scripture in tiny, artificial fragments all the time. And by doing so, do we alter the meaning without even realizing it.

Digital Bible apps make it easier than ever to Twitterize holy writ. But we’ve been doing it for ages. Here are some of the most commonly misused Bible verses.

**“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you . . .” (Jeremiah 29:11, New International Version)**

Jeremiah 29:11 reads like a Christian motivational poster. (Wait. [It IS a Christian motivational poster.](#)) No wonder it was Bible Gateway’s second-most shared verse of 2013.

Woke up on the wrong side of the bed? Don’t worry. God has a plan for your day. Facing a rough patch at work? Take a breath. Your future is bright. Money’s a bit tight? Relax. God’s going to *prosper* you.

Except the words in Jeremiah 29:11 have nothing to do with bad hair days, corporate ladders, or financial success. In 597 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah. He rounded up 10,000 leading citizens of Jerusalem and dumped them in Babylon, 500 miles from home. They lost everything. They didn’t know what to do next.

From Jerusalem, Jeremiah wrote to the exiles — and told them to get on with their lives: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters.” In other words: you’re going to be there a while. Yet God promised this wasn’t the end for them. In 70 years, the exiles would return home. *This* was the “hope and . . . future” mentioned in Jeremiah 29:11.

Incidentally, that hope and future was something most of the original exiles wouldn’t live to see for themselves. (Seventy years was a long time then, too.) The future described in this passage would be for their children and grandchildren.

In other words, Jeremiah 29:11 doesn’t guarantee your personal fulfillment.

**“We know that all things work together for good to those who love God . . . ” (Romans 8:28, New King James Version)**

Can we agree right now to ban this verse from [greeting cards](#)?

Romans 8:28 doesn't mean that losing your job or getting cancer is somehow for your own good. In fact, a better translation is probably, “In all things, God works for the good of those who love him.” In other words, whatever your circumstances, good or bad, God is still fighting for you.

In Romans, Paul claims that Jesus came to rescue both Jews and Gentiles from death, creating a new human family. For Paul, nothing can thwart God's purpose. “Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay,” and so will we. The happy ending promised in Romans 8:28 is not just any good outcome, like finding a new job or selling your house for more than the asking price. It's the ultimate happy ending: the renewal of all things.

To quote N.T. Wright, “The world is still groaning, and we with it; but God is with us in the groaning, and will bring it out for good.” That's what Romans 8:28 is about.

**“Ask and it will be given to you . . . ” (Luke 11:9, New International Version)**

It's tempting (and lucrative, for some preachers) to treat this nugget of Scripture as an ironclad promise. Whatever you ask for — promotion, wealth, the spouse of your dreams — God will give it to you.

Unless, of course, Luke 11:9 is part of a larger narrative in which Jesus has already told us what to ask for. After a brief episode in which he defends Mary over her sister Martha for choosing what matters most — being a disciple, a citizen of his kingdom — Jesus' followers ask him how to pray. Jesus tells them to ask for things like daily bread, the advent of his kingdom, forgiveness for sin. Only then does he say, “Ask and it will be given to you.”

It's not, “Ask for anything you want.” It's more like, “Ask for my kingdom, and you will have it.”  
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**“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13, New Revised Standard Version)**

What happens when we treat the Bible as a random collection of freestanding verses? Well, for one thing, as Tyndale House Publishers editor Keith Williams told [Christianity Today](#), “Philippians 4:13 is going to refer to an athletic performance rather than perseverance through need.”

For some, “I can do all things” means scoring touchdowns and clearing the bases. But that's not exactly what Paul had in mind. Paul was sharing that he'd learned to be content no matter what his circumstances — rich or poor, hungry or well fed, in prison or out. What Paul was saying is not so much “I can *achieve* anything,” but “I can *endure* anything” — which, in his case, included prison.

**“You will always have the poor among you . . .” (Matthew 26:11, New Living Translation)**

It may not be one of the most popular Bible verses, but this is one of the more frequently misunderstood. As a kid growing up in church, I sometimes heard this text used put down other people’s efforts to fight poverty. *There’s always going to be poor people. Jesus said as much. So why fight it?*

Except the context of this verse suggests a rather different picture. Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 15, which commanded Israel to cancel everyone’s debts every seven years. “There need be no poor people among you,” the writer insisted, “if only you fully obey.”

A few lines later, he added, “There will always be poor people in the land.” This was a *concession* to reality, not an excuse for apathy. In fact, it was all the more reason to be openhanded with the poor.

Jesus alludes to Deuteronomy 15 when he explains why it was okay for a woman to anoint him with expensive perfume shortly before his death, rather than sell the perfume and give the money to the poor. Mark’s gospel offers an extended version of Jesus’ line: “The poor you will always have with you, *and you can help them any time you want.*”

Maybe we’d be better off focusing on the latter part of Jesus’ statement.

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What do all these misused Bible verses have in common? Well, each is short enough to fit into a single tweet, for one thing. But the Twitterized Bible often leads us down the wrong path because it reinforces an artificial structure on the text. ([It’s not like the Bible originally came with all those verse numbers.](#))

But there’s an even more damaging effect. If I’m free to ignore the larger context, then it becomes easier to read the Bible like a narcissist. Suddenly, Jeremiah 29:11 is all about me, not some long dead exiles in Babylon. Philippians 4:13 is about my personal achievements, not the hope that sustained Paul in a dank prison cell.

The thing is, the Bible is not all about me. It wasn’t even written to me. And ironically, if I’m going to get whatever it has for me, I need to start reading it with that in mind.



# The Most Misused Verse in the Bible

Why do we twist God's promises—and how can we stop doing so?

By chris blumhofer

<http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/deeper-walk/features/21141-the-most-misused-verse-in-the-bible>

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“Jeremiah 29:11 is one of the most misused promises in the whole Bible!” a teacher of mine once proclaimed. I nodded in agreement when I first heard my teacher say that, but to be honest I couldn’t tell you what he meant. “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11, ESV). What’s wrong with applying that to our lives?

Here’s how I learned the hard way: I first had the promise of Jeremiah 29 offered to me in a greeting card at my college graduation. Two “Precious Moments”-type figures prayed on the front of a card, and on the inside was God’s promise to give me a future and a hope. Naturally, I knew exactly what God’s future and hope meant for a person in my situation: a job. I had already begun looking for work, and the verse from Jeremiah was a boost to my confidence.

I spent most of the next year trying to find work. I sent hundreds of emails, revised dozens of resumes and cover letters. I perfected the “just checking to see if you received my application and would like to set up a time to talk” phone call. I had a few good interviews but no offers.

In this rather pitiful way, my job-seeking failures evoked a crisis. What was God waiting for? I asked. Where was my future and my hope? And why was God not providing for me? As I waited for answers to these questions, I learned how to read Jeremiah 29 differently and, even more importantly, how to recognize the subtle ways that my view of God had been twisted out of shape.

The real story

Learning to re-read Jeremiah 29 required me to back up and understand the story of Jeremiah, especially chapter 28. That earlier chapter records a confrontation between the prophet Jeremiah and another prophet named Hananiah. They are standing in the Jerusalem temple—which is empty because the Babylonians had ransacked the city—when Hananiah makes a bold promise: God is going to restore Israel in two years. (Two years!) All the things that were stolen, all the people forced into slavery, everything will be better in two short years. The tens of thousands of people living in exile will be coming home soon.

Jeremiah recognized exactly what kind of promise this was. It sounded good in the short term and would make Hananiah and his supporters very popular. Hananiah may even have believed the promise himself. But it wasn’t true. God had no plans to make everything better in two years. Speaking through Jeremiah, God says to Hananiah, “You have made these people trust in a lie.”

Then comes Jeremiah 29. Against the backdrop of false promises about prosperity—about God’s wonderful plan to set everything right in the near future—Jeremiah sends a letter to Babylon that says,

more-or-less: "All of you people are going to be in exile for 70 years. You're going to die in Babylon. Your children are going to die in Babylon. Settle in."

We often read Jeremiah 29 like it is good news, plain and simple. But to the first people who heard those words, they were a tremendous disappointment. God's people had suffered terribly. They had lost their land, their throne, their temple. Before Jerusalem fell in battle, the people had given in to cannibalism. They were then force-marched 800 miles and paraded (literally) through a pagan city in which they were now considered as the living symbols of the power of that city's god.

It was into this kind of despair that Jeremiah offered God's promise: "I know the plans I have for you ... plans for your welfare and not for your harm, to give you a future and a hope." They were not easy words to hear. Jeremiah promised that God had a plan that was certain and inevitable. But it would not unfold on Israel's timetable. It would not simply undo Israel's hardship. Yet the promise stood: God would fully restore His people and bring them out of their desperate situation, but He would not do it in the way any of them would have planned it.

All along I had heard Jeremiah 29 like I was listening to Hananiah—as if God would work out everything for my benefit in the near future and in ways that made sense to me. This is what my teacher meant about misusing God's promise: we take Jeremiah 29 out of its context and hear in it the promises we want to receive.

### God the vending machine

When we realize our interpretation of Jeremiah (or any passage) has given in to such a misreading, we should step back and consider how we arrived in a place where God more closely resembled a vending machine than our creator and savior. It was Martin Luther who quipped, "What the heathen had in their wood, we have in our opinions." He meant by that saying to remind us idolatry still exists. The form of it changes in every generation, but the tendency for us to exchange the truth of God for a lie continually confronts each person. We have a startling capacity for self-deception.

With that in mind, it's noteworthy that God speaks in Jeremiah 29:13–14 and says, "You will find me, if you seek me with all your heart ... and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you." The blessing (the restoration) is directly tied to being in right relationship with God. And being in right relationship flows from seeking "with all your heart."

There are many ways to keep in check our subtle tendencies to twist God's promises and plans into caricatures of what they really are. We can read the Bible with a greater sensitivity to context. We can open our thoughts about God and Scripture to others. Perhaps the most important way, however, is it to recommit ourselves to seeking God. Seeking God will not always result in fixes for life's problems. Instead, it will cause us to realize we live within a much bigger story—one in which God resolves the disappointments of life in ways that far exceed our shortened sight.

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Read more at <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/deeper-walk/features/21141-the-most-misused-verse-in-the-bible#tUh5LV3ITsPX0fl.99>



## TITUS

### INTRODUCTION

Titus was a Gentile convert (Gal. 2:3) who had served and traveled with the Apostle Paul (Gal. 2:1–3). Titus had also functioned as a faithful emissary to the troubled church in Corinth (2 Cor. 7:6–7; 8:6, 16). In approximately a.d. 63–64, sometime after they left Timothy behind in Ephesus, Paul and Titus traveled on to Crete. After a brief visit Paul then left Titus behind to help provide leadership for the Cretan churches (Titus 1:5). Subsequently the apostle wrote this epistle and had it delivered to Titus.

The exact time and place of writing is unknown. (See the Introduction to 1 Timothy for a more detailed discussion of the authorship and dating of the Pastoral Epistles.) The purpose of the epistle to Titus was to instruct him about what he should do and teach in the Cretan churches. A special theme of the letter is the role of grace in promoting good works among God's people (Titus 2:11–3:8).

Paul hoped to join Titus again in Nicopolis for the winter (3:12), but there is no way of knowing whether that meeting ever took place. Titus was last mentioned by Paul (2 Tim. 4:10) as having gone to Dalmatia (Yugoslavia). Tradition has it that Titus later returned to Crete and there served out the rest of his life.

### OUTLINE

- I. Salutation (1:1–4)
- II. Qualifications of the Elders (1:5–9)
- III. Characteristics of the False Teachers (1:10–16)
- IV. Godly Behavior for Different Groups (2:1–10)
  - A. Older men (2:1–2)
  - B. Older women (2:3)
  - C. Younger women (2:4–5)
  - D. Younger men (2:6–8)
  - E. Slaves (2:9–10)
- V. Role of Grace in Promoting Godly Behavior (2:11–3:11)
  - A. The educating power of grace (2:11–14)
  - B. The gracious behavior that results from grace (2:15–3:2)
  - C. Grace as a motivation for godly living (3:3–8)
  - D. Behavior inconsistent with grace (3:9–11)
- VI. Final Instructions and Greetings (3:12–15)

*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*