

Chapter 4.

Rule #4: “A Text Taken out of Context Becomes a Pretext”

When I first designed this book, each rule was going to have the same three words followed by a fourth word. Chapter 1 was “Read Your Bible Prayerfully”. Chapter 2 was “Read Your Bible Systematically”. I ended up dropping that theme as I ran out of ideas by Chapter 5. I was going to call this chapter “Read Your Bible Carefully”. While that principal is essential, it does not quite grasp the idea and potential problems behind Rule #4 as it is written. Another possible title of this rule came from an apologist in Southern California named Greg Koukl. He gives a lecture called, “Never Read a Bible Verse”. The main point behind that lecture is that one should analyze a Bible verse out of context of the surrounding verses. That is the idea behind Rule #4. This Rule as it is written has been pounded in my head for years from many different teachers. I can’t remember where I was when first heard this principal, but I have heard it often enough as it has now stuck in my head and I made it part of this list. The expression itself “A Text Taken out of Context Becomes a Pretext” has been around a long time and is a common rule not only for bible study but for proper interpretation for any quotation.

If I had to give the number one reason why people misquote the Bible, it is this rule right here. The rule has a couple of big words, but the rule is easy to remember because three of the words rhyme. The word “context” as it is used here simply means to understand what the Bible is saying in comparison to the surrounding passage. One sentence or one phrase outside of a paragraph can have a completely different meaning unless it is read in context of the surrounding ideas. To develop a biblical pretext means to give a pre-conceived notion of what the phrase means. Most of the bad pretexts about the Bible come from reading a verse out of context of the surrounding passages.

When you read your Bible, there are three main things you want to get out of your reading. The first is to observe what the text says, the second is the interpretation of the text and the third is to understand how the text applies to your life. I like to summarize those three points as: What does the text say? What does the text mean? What does the text have to do with my life? To read any bible verse out of context of the surrounding verses gives way to the danger of forming a pretext out of the text, that is, bad interpretation or a bad application to your life.

A common problem to all bible readers is to not understand what the Bible is saying. I want all of you beginners out there to know that the most aged veterans struggle with certain passages and contemplate their meaning. Therefore, you are not alone in wondering what a particular bible passage means. When you are stuck, first of all pray. This is why Rule #1 is to study your bible prayerfully. The next logical thing to ask is, “What is the author trying to say? One of the best ways to figure it out is to read the passage in the context of the surrounding passages. It sounds like a simple idea but you would be surprised how often people fail to do so.

Think of all the sermons that have been preached over the years on any single verse of the Bible. There is nothing wrong with giving a sermon on just one verse if that verse is interpreted properly and applied properly. If a lecture or sermon on a bible verse does not sound right, go

study the verse in context of the surrounding verses and see if that pastor or teacher is properly interpreting the verse. Consider the following bible verse:

“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” (Acts 17:11, NIV)

In this passage, Paul was on one of his missionary journeys. When he came to the town of Berea, Paul preached about Jesus from the Old Testament. He didn't have any choice on this because the New Testament was not compiled as of yet. The Bereans are called “noble” in this passage because they didn't just trust what Paul was preaching, but they studied the Bible for themselves to see if Paul was properly interpreting the Bible. In other words, they were applying Rule #4 to their lives: “A Text Taken out of Context Becomes a Pretext”. They checked their own bibles to see if Paul was teaching the Bible properly.

I mentioned back in Chapter 2 that the chapter and verse numbers were not added until centuries after the text was written. I mention that again here so that if you go back and read the surrounding verses, don't just stop at a chapter break. Often, the same thought continues from one chapter to another. One also has to be careful with “study bibles”. Many bibles that you can buy come with titles over the chapter numbers and with additional commentary in the footnotes or in the margins. Usually this is excellent helpful commentary. Just remember that those additional comments, including the chapter titles are not God inspired like the Bible itself. There is nothing wrong with developing your own bible interpretation or application, as long as it is biblically supported. You may interpret a verse differently than your bible commentary. There are many minor debate points over which scholars argue. If your view can be supported biblically, it may be as sound as the one written in the commentary. We are going to discuss that point more in Chapter 5 called “Interpret the Bible with the Bible”.

Even if you read a bible verse in context of the surrounding passages, it can still be difficult to understand. Notice what Peter says about Paul's letters in the Bible:

“Remember that we are saved because our Lord is patient. Our dear brother Paul told you the same thing when he wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes about this in all his letters. ¹⁶Some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand, and people who are ignorant and weak in faith explain these things falsely. They also falsely explain the other Scriptures, but they are destroying themselves by doing this.” (2nd Peter 3:15-16, NCV)

Notice that in Verse 16 Peter says that some things in “Paul's letters are hard to understand”. Now if Peter had difficulty comprehending the letter, you can take comfort that you are not the only one struggling with the interpretation of the Bible. These same two verses warn against false teachers who misinterpret Paul's letters. The danger of misinterpretation often comes from studying passages out of context of what Paul, or whoever the author, is trying to communicate.

Another issue one has to remember is the style of writing of the passage. I want to talk about the different writing styles of the Bible. Keeping this in mind will often help one in applying

Rule #4 and helping one to understand a passage. The Bible is often broken down into four different types of writing styles: 1) narrative, 2) poetic, 3) prophetic and 4) instructional. Most of the Bible is written in a narrative style, with a story told from start to finish. A story, with a beginning and an end is called narrative style of writing. In some books of the Bible, the first chapter is an overview or introduction prior to the actual story. Not all passages in the Bible tell a story. I'll talk about non-narrative style of writings in the next few paragraphs. One has to remember that these four types will often overlap. For example, you can find poetry in one of the books that is narrative in its style. You can find narrative passages in instructional books. Each book of the Bible has one of these four basic styles, but will often contain some or all of the other three within those books.

Poetic style books are written in verses. In English, we think of poetry as having the words rhyme. Hebrew poetry (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs) is often two passages with connecting thoughts. The main point is the first half of the verse has a thought that is connected to the second half of the verse. Here is a fairly famous example:

Foolishness [is] bound up in the heart of a child;
The rod of correction will drive it far from him
(Proverbs 22:15, NKJV)

While each half of this verse is a separate thought, one can see how they are connected. My point pertaining to Rule #4 is that if you just read the first half, you will come to the conclusion that all children are foolish and there is nothing much you can do about it. If you just read the second half you will be wondering who is the "him" that needs the rod of correction. The two thoughts together teach that discipline is necessary when a child is rebelling (that is, acting "foolishly"). This example is overly simple, but the principle can apply to any part of the Bible. The problem with the poetry section such as the Book of Proverbs is often each "couplet" of verses stands by itself and those couplets cannot be interpreted with the help of other surrounding verses. This is where Rule #5 ("Interpret the Bible with the Bible") will often come into help. In Rule #5, I will talk about looking elsewhere in the bible to help understand a verse.

Another style of Hebrew poetry uses acrostics. This is a fancy word that means that the first word of each verse begins with a different letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. Suppose I say to you, "A" is for the way I adore you, "B" is for your beauty and "C" is for your charm", and go on from there. That is an acrostic poem. Because we read the English translation, we don't see the Hebrew acrostic. For example in Proverbs Chapter 31, there are 22 verses describing the beauty of a women (verses 10-31). Each one begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In Psalm 122, the longest psalm in the Bible, it is separated into 22 separate stanzas. The first letter of each section begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. The reason I am sharing this with you is to remember that when you are reading Old Testament poetry, the surrounding verses can often be difficult, that is because the emphasis is on the poetic style of the writer.

Another style of the Bible is instructional. This means the book is primarily a set of instructions to be followed. Examples include the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In the New Testament, Paul's and Peter's letters are primarily instructional. Think of the instructional bible books as a set of "Do this, and don't do that". Therefore, when you read a verse out of one of these books, think in terms of, "What is the author trying to teach me?"

Often one verse by itself is confusing. Seeing that verse in the context of the surrounding verses helps one to comprehend the meaning.

The last style of writing in the Bible is prophecy. This is probably the most difficult section to understand. Prophecy simply means predictive. The book is full of predictions about some future event or multiple future events. Many books in the Old Testament are primarily prophecy. In the New Testament, the only book that fits this category is The Book of Revelation. Prophecy is found in most books of the Bible. It is sometimes hidden in the poetry of Psalms and Proverbs. The New Testament will often explain the meaning of an Old Testament Prophecy (Again, Rule #5 is “Interpret the Bible with the Bible”. About a third of the Bible is prophetic. It is done that way to validate the Bible as the Word of God.

A question to ponder when reading prophetic passages is “Who is the author talking about? For example, there are many prophecies about the nation of Israel. What was their behavior at that time that caused the prophet to make that statement about their future? What can I learn from their behavior? Remember that the Bible works in patterns and word-pictures. These prophetic passages are often and usually literal in their fulfillment. The application to you and I is not to say, “Poor guys, they should have listened”, but to personalize those passages and say, “What does God want me to learn from those lessons?”

Now let us go back to Rule #4: “A Text Taken out of Context Becomes a Pretext”. You can read one or two verses of a prophetic passage and read it out of context. The passage may have been specifically about the nation of Israel or a surrounding nation. The surrounding passage will usually say to whom that prophecy is addressed. While the behavior lesson can be applied to you and me, the prediction made is specifically for the person or people being addressed.

Jesus himself gave prophecies in the gospels. One of them becomes an excellent lesson in the application of this Rule.

Jesus said, “⁶You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁷Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. (Matthew 24:6-7, NIV)

Skipping down to Verse 14: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14, NIV)

This passage is talking about the signs prior to Jesus’ second coming. Now suppose you felt an earthquake. You read in your bible that Jesus said before he was coming back, there would be “earthquakes in various places”. Therefore, you conclude Jesus is coming back soon. Well, the problem with that interpretation is you are not reading it in context of the surrounding verses. The end of Verse 6 says, “The end is still to come”. Verse 14 says the gospel will be preached in the whole world to all nations (remember all means all) prior to Jesus second coming. My point is simply that a series of earthquakes or “rumors of wars” by themselves do not mean Jesus’ second coming is imminent. Don’t get me wrong, I live by the fact that Jesus can return at any moment, but the point is to read the “earthquake” verse in context of the surrounding verses.

One of the great advantages of living in our current times is we have lots of information and lots of help available to the Bible reader. The Bible, which was written in Hebrew and Greek (with some minor exceptions) has been translated in every major language in the world and many of the minor languages. Because the United States is one of the few places that daily bible reading is a common phenomena, there are multiple English translations. They range from very literal translations to strongly paraphrased translations. If you are truly stuck on a passage, consider looking at a different translation and see if that helps. Remember when you are reading a strongly paraphrased translation that you are often getting the writer's opinion of that verse means. If you are stuck on a passage, consider looking at multiple translations. This will often help you get the idea of what the writer was trying to communicate. One can buy a "Parallel Bible" at most Christian bookstores. This is a book that has two to four English translations listed side by side in columns. Most Bible translations are also listed on the Internet. There are web sites where one can read multiple translations simultaneously.

Rule #4 ("A Text Taken out of Context Becomes a Pretext") is important is that it helps you understand some of the difficult passages of the Bible, especially for a beginner. For example, one of the great questions among Christians is, "How much of the Old Testament applies to me today? Am I under the "law" or not? Do I have to obey the 10 commandments? Questions like these require a long theological answer, but let me try to summarize it for you in this paragraph from an evangelical Christian perspective. You are saved by trusting in Jesus paying the price for your sins. Out of gratitude for what Jesus did, you want to live your life in obedience to what God expects for our life. You don't obey the 10 commandments out of obligation, you obey them out of gratitude. Some of those other rules were particularly given only to the nation of Israel to remind them of their national relationship with God. Others are given as patterns for us to follow for our own happiness.

With that stated, the Old Testament is filled with additional commentary on the requirements and laws given to the Nation of Israel. Religious Jews count 613 commandments in the first five books of the Bible written by Moses. Which ones of those are required for obedience by Christians? Here is where Rule #4 (A Text Taken out of Context Becomes a Pretext) and Rule #5 (Interpret the Bible with the Bible) both come into play. The New Testament, particularly the Book of Acts set out guidelines as to which of the Old Testament laws are to obeyed by Christians. I'll take up this specific topic more in Chapter 5. My point I want to make here is that if you are reading an Old Testament law and wonder "Does that apply to me?", even if you read it in context of the surrounding verses, you are not certain. This is why Chapter 5 is just as important a principal as to read the Bible in context of the surrounding passages.

If this is your first time reading through the Bible, I don't want you to worry about such things as, "Now I forgot, is this a prophetic passage or a narrative passage?" The important thing is to prayerfully read over the passage, study the passage in context of the surrounding verses and ask God to help you comprehend the meaning and the application to your life. Details like writing styles are important to keep in mind, but they are far less important than learning about how the Bible applies to your life. Reading the text in context of the surrounding text leads to good bible interpretation and application. If you are truly stuck, let it go. I've been reading the Bible most of my adult life and there are passages that I still contemplate the possible meaning.

Remember that In Chapter 1 I talked about the fact that Jesus made you a promise that “The Holy Spirit will teach you all things” (See John 14:26). I do believe the “all things” refers to the Bible. That is a great promise to remember when you are stuck on a verse of the Bible. If you pray, God promises to teach and show you the meaning of that verse. God will show you an answer, but one has to remember that we work on God’s timing and not ours.

I want to end this chapter with a reminder that Satan himself can quote scripture. In the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 4 (or Luke Chapter 4) there is the story of Jesus being tempted by Satan. During one of the temptations, Satan himself quotes scripture. Here is the reference:

Then the devil took him (Jesus) to the holy city (Jerusalem) and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ (Matthew 4:5-7, NIV)

Satan tempted Jesus by saying in effect “Hey, why don’t you just prove to everybody you are the Messiah? Jump off the top of the Temple, and angels will catch you”. Satan then quotes Psalm 91:11-12 as a bible reference that angels will protect you. Here is the problem. When Satan quoted that Psalm, he purposely skipped a line. Let me quote the Psalm reference:

“For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;
they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. (Psalm 91:11-12, NIV)

Did you notice Satan forgot to mention the part about “guard you in all your ways?” The point of the temptation was that Satan was trying to get Jesus to do “Jesus’ will and not “God the Father’s will”. God the Father’s will was to have Jesus die on the cross as payment for our sins. Satan was trying to tempt Jesus with a short cut by showing off his power in a great and miraculous way. In Psalm 91, this is a prediction that God would guide Jesus “in all of your (his) ways” because Jesus always lived to do the will of God the Father, even when tempted.

The point of this entire illustration gets us back to Rule #4: “A Text Taken out of Context Becomes a Pretext”. Satan tempted Jesus by taking a text of the Bible out of context of what it was intended to mean. If Satan can misquote scripture, imagine what people can do! We guard against false teachers and bad bible interpretations by reading the Bible in context of the surrounding verses as well as applying other rules such as “Interpret the Bible with the Bible” as we will discuss in Chapter 5”.