

Rightly Understanding God's Word

Chapter Two: Learning Context Part 1 of 2

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Although all of us officially recognize the importance of context, most Bible readers still ignore it in practice. You may be an exception, but do not be too disturbed if you are one of those readers unfamiliar with the actual context of many of the passages we cite in this chapter. I have cited these passages purposely because I have repeatedly heard these passages taken out of context, and my students are frequently surprised when they actually read them in context. Although we may think we read the Bible in context, too often we read the Bible in light of how we have heard others use those same Scripture texts. Whether those interpretations are new or old, they cannot take priority over what the text itself says in context.

You need not agree with our interpretation of every example cited below, but these examples will suffice to illustrate how frequently we have ignored context. They should also illustrate how context makes a difference in our understanding. In no instance are we challenging specific doctrines people have sometimes based on these verses; we are challenging methods of interpretation. (If some texts in context do not support a doctrine, the doctrine might still be defended if other texts support it.) You will learn context principles best if you actually work through the passages yourself before reading our interpretation of them; this way you will recognize what students in my classrooms usually recognize: when most the students come to the same conclusions independently, they recognize for themselves how clear the point of the text is.

We begin with some brief examples of context within verses, but the emphasis of this chapter will be on broader levels of context.

Context within Verses

Traditional English poetry balances sounds with rhymes, but ancient Hebrew poetry balanced ideas instead. Most translations place the poetry of Psalms and most of the biblical Prophets in verse form. (The King James Version did not only because translators in 1611 had not yet rediscovered the idea-balancing pattern.) There are different kinds of idea-balancing, or parallelism, in texts; we mention here only two of the most common. In one kind of parallelism, the second line repeats the basic idea of the first (sometimes adding or replacing some details)—for instance, “Happy is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path traversed by sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers” (Ps 1:1). In another kind of parallelism, the second line is an explicit contrast with the first; for instance, “Ill-gotten gains do not profit, But righteousness delivers from death” (Prov 10:2, NASB).

You have perhaps often heard the expression, “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov. 29:18). But what does Proverbs mean by “vision”? Does it just mean having a good plan for the future (the way some of my friends had preached it before they realized the context)? Does it mean that a driver who needs glasses might run over someone if she drives without her glasses? Because most of the Book of Proverbs is a collection of general principles rather than a sustained argument, the verses around Proverbs

29:18 do not help us interpret the verse very well. The other half of the verse, however, does provide some context. “Where there is no vision, the people perish; but happy is the person who obeys God’s law” (Prov. 29:18). The second half of the verse parallels the basic idea of the first half: visions and the law are both sources of God’s revelation, sources of hearing from God. In other words, “vision” does not refer to mere natural sight; nor does it merely refer to having a plan for the future; it refers to hearing from God. The Hebrew term translated “vision” here in fact relates to dreams, revelations, or oracles, which confirms the point: God’s people needed the Bible and genuine prophets who had heard from God to guide them in the right way.

Proverbs 11:1 warns that God hates a “false balance.” Unfortunately, some people today quote this verse to imply that God wants us to be “balanced” people, not too committed to a particular agenda. But the real point of the proverb is to avoid cheating our neighbor: the rest of the verse reads, “but God delights in a correct weight.” In the markets of ancient Israel, people would weigh out grain or other items in return for a particular weight of money, but some people cheated their customers by changing the scales. This kind of parallelism is frequent in Israelite poetry (for instance, Mary means basically the same thing when she says that her soul “exalts” the Lord as when she declares that her spirit rejoices in God—Lk 1:46-47.)

Another example of within-verse context may be Hosea 4:6: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.” Often we get the meaning of this verse correct even without knowing the context, but this may be more because we value the Bible like Hosea did than because the line we quote is explicit by itself. After all, we could be destroyed for lack of knowledge about driving, test-taking, foreign policy, crime prevention, disease, and so forth. But the “knowledge” in this particular verse does not mean all kinds of knowledge. The verse specifically refers to Israel’s rejection of God’s Law: “...Since you forgot my law” (Hosea 4:6). In other words, God’s people are destroyed because they have not paid attention to His Word; they do not know Him because they do not know it.

Helpful as it is to examine the context within a particular verse, in most cases we need a broader circle of context than simply within a verse.

Paragraph Context: Train Yourself

Paragraph context is usually what people mean when they talk about “reading in context.” We cannot stop with paragraph context—a work may make a point in a sentence that functions as part of a larger argument within a paragraph which in turn functions as part of a larger argument within an entire book of the Bible. Nevertheless, context on the level of paragraphs—the immediately related material around a particular verse—is essential to putting verses in context. If you sit in a church service where someone rattles off verse after verse, you need to be able to check each of those verses in context. In time you may learn the Bible well enough that you immediately know the context as soon as anyone quotes a verse; until then, you need to look the verses up and find the context. For your own Bible study, however, do not even begin with isolated verses; read paragraphs (and preferably books) as a whole.

Instead of simply reading through the rest of this chapter at this point, I highly recommend that you look up the following verses in context and decide for yourself what they mean. Ask yourself the questions we have attached to each of these texts. After you have finished, you may check your own conclusions with our observations on these and other texts below. If our observations bring issues to your attention which you had not considered, you may want to consider them and reread the text (although in the end you are not obligated to accept all our conclusions). If our observations merely confirm your own reading, you can surmise that your context-reading skills are fairly well-developed. The goal is not simply to hold particular views on the sample texts listed below, but to learn the skill of reading *all* Scripture in context. (As a young Christian I used most of the following verses out of context until I began systematically studying the Bible book by book, at which time their context gradually became obvious to me.) Some of the more difficult passages (toward the end of our list) are more debatable in sense than some of the more obvious ones (toward the beginning).

1. John 10:10: Who is the thief? (start back at least at 10:1 or at least 10:5)
2. When Jesus says, “If I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32), what does He mean by being “lifted up”?
3. Which day is the “day that the Lord has made” (Ps. 118:24)? Does the text refer to every day (the way we usually apply it) or to a specific day? (see Ps. 118:22-23; more generally 118:15-29)
4. Is God’s announcement that He owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10) an assurance that He can supply all our needs? Or does it mean something else in context? (Keep in mind that other

passages do teach that God supplies our needs; the question here is not whether God will provide, but whether that is what this passage means.)

5. What does the “baptism of fire” refer to in Matt. 3:11? Is it just a purification or empowerment for believers or something else? (Keep in mind that “fire” symbolizes different things in different passages. The question is, what does “fire” mean in *this* immediate context?)
6. By calling us to “imitate” God (Eph 5:1; King James’ “followers” here is literally “imitators”), does Paul want us to speak planets into existence? To be everywhere at once? Check the context (4:32-5:2).
7. What does it mean to resist the devil in James 4:7? In 1 Peter 5:8? In Ephesians 4:27? Some people use these verses to support rebuking the devil whenever something goes wrong. Is that the point?
8. Some people quote Joel 2:9 to say that we are God’s mighty army (in a spiritual sense). Other texts may say that, but is that the point of this text?
9. Some people quote Joel 3:10 to say that we should claim God’s strength when we are weak. While that is a biblical principle (2 Cor 12:10), is it the point here?
10. Read Isaiah 14:12-14 in view of the whole of Isaiah 14. To whom does this text refer? (Keep in mind that “Lucifer,” found only in the King James Version, is simply a Latin title for the “morning star,” not actually found in the Hebrew; because some interpreters believed this text referred to Satan, they applied the title to Satan, but the Bible does not use the term anywhere else, so whether or not it is actually Satan’s title depends on the meaning of this passage.)
11. Many people apply Ezek 28:12-14 to the devil, just as they apply Is 14 to him. In context, is that really the point of this passage? (Again, we are not questioning whether the devil exists or whether the devil fell. The question is whether *this* passage teaches it.)
12. When Paul says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13), does he have anything in particular in mind? (I.e., does “all things” mean that he can currently fly, walk through walls, spit fire, and so forth, or does it mean something more specific?)
13. What is the “word of God” (or, “word of Christ” in most translations) in Romans 10:17? Does it specifically refer to the Bible in this case or to something else?
14. 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. According to this passage, when will the gifts of the Spirit pass away? What is the immediate context? (cf. 12:31; 14:1) What is the function of 13:4-6 in the context of the whole letter to the Corinthians? (You may save this question until our study on book-context if you wish.)
15. Is faith in Hebrews 11:1 oriented toward receiving something in the present or toward receiving it in the future? (Start back around 10:25 and read through 12:4.)
16. Revelation 3:20. When Jesus knocks at the door, is he trying to get someone converted? (To whom is the verse addressed?)
17. One could say that when God “gave” his Son (Jn 3:16), this refers to giving Jesus at his birth in Bethlehem or giving him to the world when God raised him from the dead. What does “giving” him mean in context?
18. When one seeks first the kingdom, *what* things are added to one (Matt 6:33)?
19. Who are Christ’s ambassadors in 2 Corinthians 5:20? Whom are they entreating to be reconciled to God?
20. Some people say that the “witnesses” in Hebrews 12:1 are the dead watching us from heaven. But in the context of Hebrews chapter 11, does “witnesses” refer to those who watch us or to those who testified to the truth of God’s claims?
21. Some people claim the promise that no weapon formed against them would prosper (Isaiah 54:17). Is this a guarantee for every individual Christian or for God’s people as a whole protected by His plan for them?
22. Does Proverbs 23:7 mean that whatever we think about ourselves will come true? (“As a person thinks in their heart, so they are.”) Or does it mean something else? (Read 23:6-8.)
23. Does Psalm 18:7-15 refer to Jesus’ second coming? Read 18:4-6, 16-19.
24. Who is the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valley, in Song of Solomon 2:1-2?
25. In Matthew 18:18, what does Jesus mean by “binding and loosing”? Does He refer to how to treat demons here, or does He refer to something else? (Read especially 18:15-20.)
26. What is the “coming” to which Jesus refers in John 14:1-3? Does He refer here to His second coming or to something else? (Read 14:4-23, and perhaps 13:36-38.)
27. This final question may be the most difficult one. Read Isaiah 7:14 in context (especially 7:10-16; 8:1-4). In the immediate context, to whom does this newborn son refer? (If your conclusions may disturb you, don’t worry; we will clarify them below. But it is important for you to grapple with the text

intelligently in its context first, and not simply to interpret the passage according to how you've seen it used elsewhere.)

Paragraph Context: Checking yourself

1. The Thief in John 10:10

Many people assume that the thief in John 10:10 is the devil, but they assume this because they have heard this view many times, not because they examined the text carefully in context. In John chapter 9, Jesus heals a blind man and the religious officials kick the blind man out of the religious community for following Jesus. Jesus stands up for the formerly blind man and calls the religious leaders spiritually blind (9:35-41). Because there were no chapter breaks in the original Bible, Jesus' words that continue into chapter 10 are still addressed to the religious leaders. He declares that He was the true Shepherd and the true sheep followed His voice, not the voice of strangers (10:1-5). Those who came before Him were thieves and robbers, but Jesus was the sheep's true salvation (10:8-9). The thief comes only to destroy, but Jesus came to give life (10:10).

In other words, the thief represents the false religious leaders, like the Pharisees who kicked the healed man out of their synagogue. The devil certainly works behind such false teachers, but modern readers usually think immediately of the devil rather than of false religious leaders because they have not considered the text in its context. The background of the text clarifies this point further. In Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34, God was the shepherd of His scattered people, His sheep; these Old Testament passages also speak of false religious leaders who abused their authority over the sheep like many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day and not a few religious leaders in our own day.

2. Jesus' Crucifixion in John 12:32

I often sang, "Lift Jesus higher...He said, 'If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto Me,'" based on John 12:32. Then I realized that if the song meant by lifting Him up what the biblical verse meant, I would be yelling, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" Of course God knows our hearts, but it is unfortunate that neither the song writer nor many of us who sing such songs have taken the time to look up the verse on which it is based. John three times refers to Jesus being "lifted up": in one case, he compares this event to the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness (Jn 3:14), to make eternal life available to everyone (3:15); in another, Jesus declares that His adversaries will lift Him up (8:28); and in the final passage, where He says that He will draw all people to Himself, John explicitly tells us what the lifting up means: "He was declaring the kind of death He was going to die" (12:33). In other words, John means by "lifting up" what Isaiah meant by it: Jesus would be crucified (Isa. 52:13 with Isa. 52:14-53:12). John includes plays on words in his gospel, and may also indicate that we "exalt" Jesus by preaching the Cross; but leaves no doubt as to the primary sense of the term in this context: crucifixion. To read it any other way is to ignore his explicit, inspired explanation of the "lifting up."

3. The Day of Christ's Exaltation in Psalm 118:24

Many of us often sing, "This is the day that the Lord has made." When we sing this, most of us mean that God has made every day and what comes with it, and that we should therefore rejoice in what happens on that day. That is a true principle, but we would do better to quote a different text to prove it (maybe Eph. 5:20). In context, Psalm 118:24 refers not to every day, but to a particular day: the day when the Lord made the rejected stone the cornerstone (118:22-23), probably of the Temple (118:19-20, 27). It speaks of a special day of triumph, applicable in principle to many of God's great triumphs but often applied in the New Testament in a special way. If Psalm 118:22-23 was fulfilled in Jesus' ministry as He claimed (Mark 12:10-11), so also was Psalm 118:24: the great and momentous day the Lord had made, the day the Psalmist calls his hearers to celebrate, is the prophetic day when God exalted Jesus, rejected by the chief priests, as the cornerstone of His new temple (cf. Eph. 2:20). The verse points to a truth far more significant than merely the common biblical truth that God is with us daily; it points to the greatest act of God on our behalf, when Jesus our Lord died and rose again for us.

4. Cattle in Psalm 50:10

Some people insist that God can supply all our needs because, after all, He “owns the cattle on a thousand hills” (Ps. 50:10); some go beyond God supplying all our needs to suggest that He will supply anything we want. Again, it is true that God can supply all our needs, but there are many more appropriate texts to demonstrate that point. Psalm 50:10 does not address the issue of God supplying our needs (and certainly not all our wants); rather, it declares that God does not need our sacrifices.

The figurative setting of Psalm 50 is a courtroom, where God has summoned His people to respond to His charges. He summons heaven and earth as His witnesses (50:1-6)—as witnesses of the covenant (Deut. 32:1; cf. Ps. 50:5), they would be witnesses concerning Israel’s violation of that covenant. Israel has some reason to be nervous; God is not only the offended party in the case, but the Judge (Ps. 50:4, 6). Testifying against them, God declares, “I am your God” (50:7)—reminding them of the covenant He had made with them. They had not broken faith against Him by failing to offer sacrifices (50:8)—in fact, God doesn’t care. “I don’t need your animal sacrifices, for all the animals belong to Me, including the cattle on a thousand hills. I don’t eat animal flesh, but if I did, would I tell you if I were hungry? Since I own these creatures, wouldn’t I just take them if I wanted them?” (50:9-13). The sacrifice which He really requires is thanksgiving and obedience (50:14-15; cf. 50:23). But He would prosecute (50:21) the wicked who broke His covenant (50:16-20).

Most ancient near Eastern peoples believed that their gods depended on them for sacrifices, and if their gods were overpowered, their nation would be overpowered as well. The God of Israel reminds them that He is not like the pagan gods around them. Unlike Baal of the Canaanites (whose temples included a bed), Zeus of the Greeks (whom Hera put to sleep so her Greeks could win a battle), and other deities, the God of Israel neither slumbered nor slept (Ps. 121:3-4). God does not mention the cattle on a thousand hills to promise us anything we want (as a song pointed out some years ago, many of us don’t need any cows at the moment anyway); He mentions the cattle to remind us that He is not dependent on us, and we are not doing Him a favor by serving Him.

5. Baptized with Fire in Matthew 3:11

One modern denomination is the “Fire-Baptized Holiness Church”; many Christians happily claim to be “baptized in the Holy Ghost and fire.” We know and appreciate, of course, what they mean; they mean holiness, and holiness is essential. But is that what John the Baptist means by “fire baptism” in this passage? Fire is sometimes used as a symbol of God’s consuming holiness or of purifying trials in the Bible; but when fire is conjoined with the image of baptism in the New Testament, it has to do not with mere purification of the individual, but with purifying the whole world by judgment. Rather than cross-referencing to other passages that use the image of fire in different ways, we ought to examine what the “baptized in fire” text means in its own context. We ought to use the passage itself before jumping to a concordance.

The context is a call to repentance, and much of the audience promised this fire baptism was unwilling to repent. John the Baptist was immersing people in water as a sign of their repentance and preparation for the coming Kingdom of God (Matt. 3:2, 6). (Jewish people used baptism when non-Jews would convert to Judaism, but John demanded that even religious Jewish people come to God on the same terms on which Gentiles should; cf. 3:9.) John warned the Pharisees about God’s coming wrath (3:7), and that unless they bore fruit (3:8) God’s ax of judgment would cast them into the fire (3:10; cf. 12:33). Fruitless trees were worthless except for fuel. But chaff was barely even useful as fuel (it burned quickly), yet the chaff of which John spoke would be burned with “unquenchable”—eternal—“fire” (3:12).

In this context, “fire” is hellfire (3:10, 12). When John the Baptist speaks of a baptism in fire, he uses an image of judgment that follows through the whole paragraph. Remember that John’s hearers here are not repentant people (3:7). The Messiah is coming to give his audience a twofold baptism, and different members of his audience would experience different parts of it. Some may repent and receive the Spirit. The unrepentant would receive the fire!

6. Imitating God in Ephesians 5:1

This passage summons us to imitate God the way children imitate a father. The text is also specific, however, in the ways that we should imitate God: we should forgive as God in Christ forgave us (4:32) and

love one another, just as Christ sacrificially loved us (5:2). Happily, the text does not require us to imitate God by being all-powerful or everywhere at once!

7. Resisting the Devil in James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8-9; Ephesians 4:27

James contrasts the peaceful wisdom which is from God (3:13, 17-18; “from above” was a typical Jewish way of saying, “from God”) with the contentious wisdom which is from the devil (3:14-15). Then he warns his audience not to try to hold both perspectives as if they were compatible. Those who try to follow both God’s and the world’s wisdom at the same time are spiritual adulteresses (4:4). Submitting to God and resisting the devil (4:7), then, is rejecting the world’s evil way of treating one another and preferring the gentle approach that comes from God. To adopt this new way of treating others requires repentance (4:8-10).

1 Peter refers to a situation in which Christians are being persecuted (1 Pet 4:12-16); in 1 Peter 5:8-9, the devil apparently seeks to crush believers by seeking to turn them from the faith. Resisting him therefore means withstanding the persecution. In the context of Ephesians 4:27, one resists the devil by refusing to deceive or stay angry with one’s fellow-believers (4:25-26); in the whole context of Ephesians, this is part of “spiritual warfare” (6:11-14, 18).

8. God’s Locust Army in Joel 2:9

Although the third chapter of Joel seems to describe a future war, chapters one and two depict as an invading army a devastating locust plague (Joel 1:4; 2:25). This text does not depict the church as a spiritual army of evangelists; it depicts locusts as an agricultural judgment against the sins of God’s people.

9. The Strength of the Weak in Joel 3:10

This passage is not an invitation to the weary righteous to strengthen themselves. God is speaking in judgment to the nations gathered against his people for the final war (Joel 3:9). God commands them to make their weapons and make themselves strong, when in fact they are hopelessly weak before them. He is actually mocking the enemies of his people as he invites them to judgment (3:12-14).

10. Babylon’s Ruler in Isaiah 14

The full context of this passage would let us know that Isaiah is denouncing a ruler, even if he did not tell us so explicitly. Like many other ancient Israelite prophets, Isaiah includes oracles against various nations: Babylon (Isa. 13-14), Moab (Isa. 15-16), Damascus (Isa. 17), the Nubian and Egyptian empires (Isa. 18-20), Babylon again (21:1-10), Edom (21:11-12), Arabia (21:13-17), Jerusalem (22), and Tyre (23). Isaiah 14:3-4 explicitly tell us that the following oracle is directed against the ruler of Babylon—an oppressor (14:4), a ruler (14:5), who conquered other nations (14:6). As he is defeated, the nations rejoice (14:7); figuratively speaking, even the trees of Lebanon rejoice, for he will no longer be cutting them down for his building projects (14:8). How has the Lord brought this king low, breaking his rod and scepter (14:5)? The text clearly indicates that he is DEAD: he goes to Sheol, the realm of the dead (14:9), and other rulers there rejoice that the ruler who defeated them has died just like them (14:9-10). His pomp and dignity ruined, his court harpists silenced, he now rots with maggots and worms consuming his flesh (14:11)—i.e., he is a corpse.

Like Israel whose glory was cast from heaven to earth (Lam. 2:1), this ruler has been cast from heaven to earth. At this point some readers want to ignore the context and insist that the text refers to a literal fall from heaven, in which case, they say, it must be applied to a fallen angel like the devil. But the jubilant outcries of Lebanon’s cedars in 14:8 was hardly literal; neither was the image of dead rulers rising from their thrones in the realm of the dead in 14:9 (would they still be enthroned)? Hebrew poetry painted pictures with words, just as poetry normally does today; in contrast to nonpoetic parts of Isaiah, the poetic portions are consistently full of figurative speech. Other texts also speak of figurative falls from heaven (Amos 9:2; Matt 11:23; Lk 10:15).

Kings of Babylon, like some other ancient near Eastern kings, actually claimed to be gods (compare, for example, Dan 3:5; 6:7). Claiming to be a deity like the morning star or offspring of the sun god or deity of dawn would not be unnatural for an ancient near Eastern ruler, but Isaiah grants the title only in

contemptuous mockery: “Poor king of Babylon! You reached for heaven, but have been cast down to earth! You tried to raise yourself above God, but now you have died like a man!” (compare the similar taunt in Ps. 82:6-8). Verses 12-14 refer to the king of Babylon just like the preceding verses do: he once conquered nations (14:12), wanted to be enthroned on the sacred mountain (perhaps referring to Babylon’s future conquest of Mount Zion in Jerusalem) (14:13), and he was brought down to Sheol, the realm of the dead (14:15).

The following context drives home the point still more thoroughly: this is “the man” who struck fear into the hearts of nations (14:16), “the man” whose conquests made lands deserted, destroying cities, carrying peoples off into captivity (14:17). Unlike the other nations’ kings who at least were buried in dignity in royal tombs (a final honor very important to ancient people’s sense of honor), this king’s corpse was thrown out in the open to rot, trampled underfoot in punishment for the violent destruction he had brought upon his own people (14:18-20). His descendants and those of his people, Babylon, would be cut off (14:21-22). The text could not be any plainer in context: this explicit oracle against the king of Babylon (14:3-23) would be fulfilled in its time, and God’s oppressed people vindicated.

Despite the clarity of this text, some people remain so committed to their earlier understanding of the text that they are determined to get around the context. “Well, maybe it does refer to the king of Babylon, but it must refer to the devil, too,” they protest. But why *must* it refer to the devil? Is the text not clear enough as it stands? Do any of the oracles against other nations (chs. 13-23) contain hidden prophecies against the devil? Was the devil a mere earthly conqueror, brought to the realm of the dead after he was thrust from heaven (14:12, 15)? “But we all know that Lucifer refers to the devil, and that the devil said he would ascend to heaven,” one student protested to me. “How do we know it?” I replied. I pointed out that the view that “Lucifer” refers to the devil and that the devil promised to ascend to heaven is based on an interpretation of the King James translation of this text. If “Lucifer” appeared here, it would be the only place in the Bible it occurred, but it does not in fact occur here, either. The Hebrew does not speak of “Lucifer” here; that is a Latin title for the “morning star” which the King James Version used in its translation here. “Therefore,” I responded sadly, “you have told me nothing but that some people interpret this text as referring to the devil—an opinion of which I was already aware.” Unable to make their case in Isaiah 14, some students have then declared that Isaiah 14 must refer to the devil because Ezekiel 28 does.

There are two fallacies in this argument. First of all, Ezekiel 28 and other passages could refer to the fall of the devil without Isaiah 14 having to do with that subject; nowhere in my exposition have I denied that the devil fell. I only denied that this was the point of Isaiah 14. The second fallacy of the argument is that Ezekiel 28 does not clearly refer to the fall of the devil, either.

11. Tyre’s Ruler in Ezekiel 28

Ezekiel also has oracles against the nations: Ammon (25:1-7), Moab (25:8-11), Edom (25:12-14), Philistia (25:15-17), Tyre (26:1-28:19), Sidon (28:20-26), and Egypt (29:1-32:32). The passage sometimes applied to the devil, 28:12b-19, is in the heart of an oracle against the ruler of Tyre; in fact, verse 12 begins, “Son of man, take up this lament against the ruler of Tyre.” No one disputes that the context refers to the ruler of Tyre, but those who apply the text to the devil declare that it also applies to him, because (they claim) some features of the text cannot apply to anyone but the devil.

This argument, as we shall see, is not actually accurate. The lament calls this ruler arrogant about his wisdom and perfection of beauty (28:12, 17)—just as Tyre claimed to be perfect in beauty (27:3-4, 11) and full of wisdom that brought wealth (28:3-4), self-proclaimed wisdom that made the ruler think he was a god (28:6) though he was but a human being (28:8-10). This ruler was in Eden, the garden of God (28:13), which advocates of the devil-interpretation think must be taken literally: only the devil was in Eden, they say. But this claim is not true; Adam and Eve, who did seek equality with God (Gen. 3:5), also lived in Eden, and Ezekiel could compare the Tyrian ruler’s hubris with that of the first people. Yet another explanation is better than either the devil-interpretation or the Adam-interpretation: Ezekiel explicitly compares the ruler of Babylon to a cherub (28:14-15). Genesis calls neither Adam nor the serpent a cherub, but does refer explicitly to cherubim in the garden: God’s angels stationed there to keep Adam and Eve out after their fall (Gen. 3:24; cf. Ezek. 28:14-15 NIV: “guardian cherub”). In other words, this is an image representing great prestige in God’s garden. (The “holy mountain of God”—28:14—might allude to Mount Zion, as often in Scripture, in which case the image of cherubim probably also recalls the cherubim on which God was enthroned on the ark in the Temple. The blamelessness until found wicked—28:15—may also be part of the cherub image.)

Some have objected that the king cannot simply be *compared* to a glorious cherub in Eden; the text calls him a cherub, and must be interpreted literally. Those who insist that all details of such prophecies should be taken literally, however, simply demonstrate that they are unfamiliar with the prophets' writings in general. Ezekiel himself is full of graphic, poetic images and metaphors (comparisons in which one thing is simply called another without "like" or "as"), one of which is a statement that Pharaoh was a tree in Eden, God's garden (Ezek. 31:1-18; he is also a sea monster, 29:3-5). Drawing on various images from the account of Adam and Eve's fall, Ezekiel's prophecies speak both of the stately cherubim and the greatest trees in Eden (perhaps the tree of life or the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?) Perhaps advocates of the devil-interpretation press their case that being in Eden refers to the devil in Ezekiel 28 but not in Ezekiel 31 because they can only fit Ezekiel 28 into their view in some other respects. (Some cite the "pipes" on his body, but this is based on only one translation, which the Hebrew does not appear to support here.)

The adornment of precious stones (28:13) alludes to Tyre's great wealth, elsewhere described in terms of gorgeous array (27:4-7, 24) and trade in diverse merchandise including precious stones (27:16, 22). The wickedness of 28:15 is the wickedness of Tyre's merchant interests (28:16), her "dishonest trade" (28:18 NIV) elsewhere referred to in the context (27:2-36; 28:4-5; cf. 26:17). The king's pride on account of his beauty (28:17) recalls the pride of the ruler of Tyre who claims to be a god yet is merely a man (28:2), proud because of the wealth Tyre had amassed through trading (28:5). That fire would come forth from the ruler of Tyre (28:18), just as ancient cities were normally destroyed by burning in their midst (cf. e.g., Amos 1:4, 7, 12; 2:2, 5—especially Amos 1:10, against Tyre).

Ezekiel refers to an arrogant human ruler. The ruler in this passage exalts himself in pride and is cast down; the casting down is more explicit in the oracle earlier in the chapter (28:2-10). He claimed to be a god, enthroned in the heart of the seas (28:2; Tyre was off the seacoast of Phoenicia). God has Ezekiel mock this ruler: You think that you are as wise as a god (28:6), but God would bring judgment on this ruler by other nations (28:7); then would he still pretend to be a god in front of those who would kill him (28:9)? He was a "man," not a god, and he would die a horrible and violent death (28:8-10). This is hardly a description of the devil, an immortal spirit; this is an earthly ruler who claimed to be a god, who would learn his mortality at the time of God's judgment on Tyre.

Yet even if these two passages referred to the devil as well as to earthly rulers—though in context they do not—why do defenders of this view often apply these passages to the devil yet never apply them also to earthly rulers judged by God for their arrogance? Wouldn't examples of human arrogance make even more useful passages for preaching or teaching matters relevant to our hearers? I suspect that many believers simply assume these passages refer to the devil because that is the way we have always heard them interpreted, but many of us never closely examined them in context. Whatever their views, I do not believe any reader can miss our point: this passage has a broad context in the surrounding chapters, and our shortcuts to learning the Bible have failed to study the books of the Bible the way God inspired them to be written.

12. Strengthened for Contentment in Philippians 4:13

I heard of a football player at a Christian college who approached a Bible professor, greatly troubled. His coach had encouraged the team that they could "do all things through Christ who strengthens" them, citing Philippians 4:13. Yet the team had lost a few games, and the student was unable to fathom why his team was not always winning. The problem, of course, is not with the text, but with the view that the player and apparently his coach had read into the verse; Paul actually was referring to something other than winning football games in his letter. Thanking the Philippians for sending him a love-gift (4:10, 14), Paul noted that he had learned contentment with both little and with much (4:12); he could do all things through Christ (4:13). In this context, he is saying that by Christ's strength he could rejoice whether he had much or little. Today we should learn to rejoice in whatever our situation, knowing that Christ strengthens us to endure (whether persecution, ridicule, or even losing a football game).

Next Issue: Part 2 of Chapter 2 has the 14 remaining examples of reading in context to better understand God's Word, including: A Newborn Son in Isaiah 7:14, the cessation of the charismata in the context of 1 Cor. 13:8-10, and Knocking at the Door in Revelation 3:20.

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Editor's Note

Professor Keener originally designed this course on Hermeneutics for use in Nigeria and not for traditional publication. Desiring to make it available to a wider audience, he has granted permission to publish this course in the *Pneuma Review*. These lessons will also be made available on the www.PneumaFoundation.com website. Dr. Keener grants permission for others to make use of this material as long as it is offered without cost or obligation and that users acknowledge the source.

Portions of this course follows these recommended works: *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan). *Revelation, NIV Application Commentary* by Craig S. Keener (Zondervan, 1999).

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