

Texts in Context

Define the word, "MAY." You might need a little bit of help with that, so let me use MAY in a few sentences.

- MAY is the month after April. (MAY is a month the year.)
- MAY I go to my friend's house. (Here MAY means, "Do I have your permission to.")
- It MAY rain. (Now MAY carries with it the idea of possibility or probability.)
- MAY missed her bus. (MAY, in this sentence, is a girl.)

There are probably a few more uses for the simple three letter word, "may," but I think the point is clear: how we define "may" depends on the context in which the word is used. If we don't read "may" in its context we are not going to be sure that we have the right definition.

The same can be true of an entire sentence. "It looks like May is going to be cold." Because "May" is capitalized, we can assume that it refers either to the month or the girl. Again, context is important, for in this case, May has left for school without a coat, and the temperature is going to plunge throughout the day. We cannot know what something means for sure without context.

This is why text messages and emails can be dangerous. Sending an address to a friend via a text message doesn't pose any problems, but if we are trying to communicate something important, something weighty, something that might evoke emotions, a text or email may not be the best method of communication. Often our words need to have a context if we want to be fully understood.

The same is true of the Bible. One of the things we can be quite sure about is that the biblical authors, even as they were guided by the Holy Spirit, knew exactly what they were writing. The biblical authors, all of them, were inspired by the Holy Spirit to put down to paper what the Spirit had put in their minds. We call it "organic inspiration," meaning that the Holy Spirit did not merely take control of the hands of the biblical authors and force them to write down letters which became words and then sentences and then paragraphs. Rather, the Spirit worked in their minds, and the human authors of the Bible wrote in a style and form with which they were familiar. Even a novice in the Greek language can discover significant differences in the writing styles of Peter and Paul, and we can detect a common thread of who John is in the books that he wrote (the Gospel of John, the three letters attributed to him, and Revelation).

When we study a particular book of the Bible (for example, John's gospel or Isaiah's prophecy), we not only discover something about the human author, but we also see that the book fits together, that it has an internal cohesion and consistency. In other words, the parts of the book fit together because the biblical authors were not only inspired by the Holy Spirit but they were also thoughtful, sane, thinkers who made it their purpose to communicate an important message.

There is an important implication to this: it is inappropriate to take a particular verse, sentence, paragraph or verse out of context. As is illustrated with the word, "may," taking something out of context may lead to us wrongly interpreting what is being said. It is very easy to make a verse of the Bible say something it is not meant to say.

Let me give one example: In Philippians 4:13 Paul says, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (NIV, 1984 edition). If I take that verse out of context, it is easy to find that it is not true for me. For example, I find it very difficult to change people’s minds, although the verse, taken out of context, seems to indicate that if I find my strength in Christ, I should be able to. And, sadly, I cannot make myself like anything that has bananas cooked into it, try as I might. Again, the verse fails. I am unable to paint a picture, and I cannot get more than a few inches off the ground in the high jump. Frankly, I would be deceiving myself if I said that I could do any of these things if I just found my strength in Christ. So, either the verse is wrong, or I am missing something.

Context makes the verse clear. Paul is writing about his sufferings (he is in prison when he writes Philippians), and he is referring to the work that Jesus Christ had called him to do. Throughout the letter to the Philippians, he speaks about the power of the gospel, and he mentions that because he is in prison, he has been able to witness to his guards, and some of them have come to faith. In other words, Philippians 4:13 is best understood to be saying that when God calls us to a particular task, we will be able to fulfill his calling because he will provide us with all the resources to fulfill our calling. (Incidentally the 2011 version of the NIV recognizes this problem and translates the “everything” as “all this,” making us ask the question, “What is this?” thereby inviting us to look at the context.)

It is very tempting for us to read verses in Scripture without considering the context. We may get them right, but there is also the significant possibility that we miss the intended meaning, and that could lead to making great mistakes about what God is saying to us. That is something we don’t really want to do.

In my years as a pastor, one of the most prevalent ways I find people making this mistake of misreading the Bible is through “prooftexting.” Someone might say, “I believe this (whatever point they are trying to make) because the Bible says so,” and they quote a particular verse. More often than not, in my experience, they have not carefully considered what the verse is actually saying in its context, and they end up making the Bible conform to their beliefs rather than the other way around.

So, how do we avoid the problem of misreading the text? It’s simple, really, for all we have to do is consider the context. What are the surrounding verses saying? What is the line of reasoning of the biblical author? What subject matter does the chapter address? What is the book itself addressing? Is this verse appear in the Old Testament, or is it from the New Testament (and sometimes that makes a huge difference.)

It’s not hard to avoid misreading the text. It’s simple, but it is a lot more work. In other words, we might have to put some effort into completing this rather simple and straightforward exercise. The results will be rewarding if we do. If we don’t, of course, we might be misrepresenting Jesus, and we don’t want to do that.

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