

Solid Ground

Enhanced

A Foundation for Building Ambassadors

Celebrating 20 Years of Ministry

January 2015

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MISQUOTING GOD:
VERSES COMMONLY MISUNDERSTOOD,
MISCHARACTERIZED, OR MALIGNED PART I

Yes, the Bible is thick with “precious and magnificent promises.” And yes, God keeps His promises to us. But He only keeps those promises that are legitimately ours. How do we know which ones we can count on? This issue of *Solid Ground* will guide you.

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Thank you,

Greg Kousser





January 1, 2015

Dear Friend,

If you've ever asked yourself the question, "How does this verse apply to my life?" you might be asking the wrong question. And if so, you might also be asking for trouble.

A host of popular verses have been consistently misunderstood by well-meaning Christians because of a simple mistake they'd never make with other writings.

Here's their blunder: They think there are verses in the Bible. What I mean is, the numbers creating individual verses give the false impression that sentences or phrases stand on their own as spiritual truths. But they almost never do.

When you ask, "How does this verse apply to my life?" you may be assuming it has significance—and therefore, application—disconnected from the larger narrative or flow of thought. That's the problem.

Most people would be surprised to discover there actually are no verses in God's inspired Word. They were added 1500 years later. As a result, some of the most popular passages have been consistently misread by believers because the numbers got in the way.

This month's *Solid Ground*, "Misquoting God," is dedicated to clearing up some of that confusion. You'll not only get the inside story on frequently misunderstood passages, you'll also see why "Never read a Bible verse" is still one of the most important rules you can live by when studying Scripture.

Yes, the Bible is thick with "precious and magnificent promises." And yes, God keeps His promises to us. But He only keeps those promises that are legitimately ours. How do we know which ones we can count on? "Misquoting God" will guide you.

Please, don't underestimate the importance of your partnership this new year. I consider it a great privilege to both instruct you and grow with you as a Christian Ambassador. So I hope you will re-commit to helping advance the work of Stand to Reason through your prayers and as you prepare your first gift of 2015.

Thanks in advance for standing with us.

Faithful to the truth,

Gregory Koukl



MISQUOTING GOD: VERSES COMMONLY MISUNDERSTOOD, MISCHARACTERIZED, OR MALIGNED PART I

By Greg Koukl

It doesn't happen often, but this time I was caught completely flatfooted, struck dumb by a challenge from a young Christian woman in Cairo.

I'd been teaching "[Never Read a Bible Verse](#)"¹ to Egyptian believers at the Focus on the Family Middle-East Student Leadership Institute. I was specifically addressing the reckless tendency of Christians to wrench Old Testament verses out of context and then "claim" them as promises for themselves when one of the students offered a challenge that left me speechless.

"Are you saying the Old Testament doesn't apply to my life?" the frustrated believer blurted out. "Many times in tough circumstances I've claimed Ex. 14:14: 'The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent.'² Now you're telling me this promise is not for me? Then how *do* I apply that verse to my life? And if that verse has no relevance for me today, then why is it in the Bible? What Old Testament verses *can* I claim for myself?" she asked. "Tell me one verse I can count on."

I realized I was caught in a quandary. Clearly she was making a mistake invoking Ex. 14:14 in her personal circumstances. Moses wasn't offering a principle or a promise for Christians dealing with opponents. In fact, the New Testament teaches the polar opposite. In the face of opposition, the Christian is to give an account, not remain silent.³

But there was a deeper problem. What of her challenge? What *could* she count on in those texts? Was it true that countless Scripture verses have no relevance or application to us as believers? What's the point, then, of citing any Old Testament passage?



I went back to my hotel that night to ponder her challenge. In the quiet of my room I poured over [the passage](#). What was I missing? What was the solution to this dilemma? Then my eyes rested on verse 13 and a light went on in my mind. I chuckled to myself, closed my Bible, and climbed into bed.

The next day I told the class about the challenge and about my late-night struggle with the text. I then told them of my relief at finding a promise right in the same passage that I could claim for myself in a few days when boarding my jet to leave Cairo and return to America:

Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again, forever.

I delivered the words slowly, with drama and gravity, so it took a moment for my Egyptian friends to get the gag. Then the whole class exploded into laughter.

Sure, I pointed out, it was a ridiculous misapplication of the passage. But exactly what was the mistake? If they denied me my "promise," wouldn't that reduce the verse to irrelevancy, adding even more Scripture to the ash heap since there'd be no application of that particular verse for my life today?



To clear up the confusion, I told them, we needed to go back 400 years to learn how a really good idea had an unusual consequence.

The Parts and the Whole

In 1551, French printer Robert Stephanus added verse numbers to the chapter divisions inserted in Scripture in the 13th century. This made navigating the text much easier, of course, but it caused a problem, too.

The numbering of individual sentences (or even phrases, sometimes), tempts readers to take the text as a collection of discrete statements having meaning and application in isolation from the larger work. Ergo, “How does *this verse* apply to my life?”

But God did not give the Bible as a collection of aphorisms—short, pithy, helpful statements—to be applied piecemeal to our lives.⁴ He gave historical accounts, descriptions of events, biographies, poems, sermons, letters, and the like. The meaning of the parts of a passage is connected to the meaning of the whole.

TO AVOID THIS PROBLEM WHEN GLEANING INSTRUCTION FROM THE TEXT, IGNORE THE CHAPTER AND VERSE DIVISIONS AND FOCUS ON THE BIGGER PICTURE.

Meaning flows from the larger unit to the smaller unit. The sentence helps us understand the meaning of an individual word in the sentence. The paragraph helps us understand what the sentence means. The chapter helps us understand the paragraph’s role in the larger narrative. And the genre and historical context help us understand the book.

Proper understanding of the whole, therefore, is key to understanding the meaning of—and

the proper application of—the parts. We cannot simply isolate a sentence or two and ask, “How can I stick this line into my life?” Instead, we have to follow the flow of thought to know how the broader passage speaks to the particulars of our individual experience.

This was the problem with my Christian sister in Cairo. She thought that if every verse *on its own* did not have some application to her life, it was superfluous. Remove the verse references, though, and the picture changes dramatically.

Application comes not from discreet sentences, but from the passage’s narrative flow of thought or its logical flow of thought—both more obvious when the numbers don’t get in the way. The Red Sea *narrative*, then, has plenty of relevance for believers even if *individual verses* can’t be applied in isolation from the context.

To avoid this problem when gleaning instruction from the text, ignore the chapter and verse divisions and focus on the bigger picture. The numbers aren’t inspired, anyway, and they sometimes get in the way of the God-given flow.

This mistake happens so often with Christians, I thought I’d explore a few examples of passages commonly misunderstood, mischaracterized, or maligned because readers disregard the flow of thought. Let’s start with an easy one.

Your Best Life Now?

I’ve heard this first verse quoted frequently as teaching “positive mental attitude,” sometimes by Christians who should know better. Here’s how it’s usually cited: “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is” (Prov. 23:7).

Think positive thoughts, make positive confessions, you’ll become a positive person—that’s the idea. Whatever your focus on the inside, will become the reality on the outside. Your mental





THE TEXT GIVES A STRAIGHTFORWARD WARNING TO KEEP YOUR GUARD UP AROUND SELFISH PEOPLE.

attitude makes you. Thoughts shape destinies.

Of course, there's truth to this point. The thoughts you fix your mind on can make a big difference in the kind of person you become. "Set your mind on the things above," Paul told the Colossians. "If there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise," he wrote the Philippians, "dwell on these things."⁵ This is not what the Sage had in mind, though, in Proverbs.



The reason we miss the point of this proverb is because it's universally misquoted. It actually reads, "For as *he* thinks within himself, so *he* is." The writer speaks of a specific man, not any man. But who? The answer

is right there in the passage. Here's the entire section, [Prov. 23:6-8](#):

Do not eat the bread of a selfish man, or desire his delicacies; for as he thinks within himself, so he is. He says to you, "Eat and drink!" but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the morsel you have eaten, and waste your compliments.

Clearly, this passage has nothing to do with positive thinking. This text gives a straightforward warning to keep your guard up around selfish people. Their egocentrism tempts them to be duplicitous, disingenuous, and two-faced. Don't fawn over them. Don't court their favor. Don't waste your efforts trying to win their approval.

Three chapters later we find a related warning:

He who hates disguises it with his lips, but he lays up deceit in his heart. When he speaks graciously, do not believe him, for there are seven abominations in his heart ([Prov. 26:24-25](#)).

Blessed Are the Blind?

Sometimes a closer look at the context reveals what a verse does *not* mean—it eliminates options—even if the precise meaning still eludes us. Jesus' encounter with Thomas, the doubting disciple, is a case in point.

As you recall, Thomas famously refused to believe in the resurrection unless he could physically touch Jesus' wounds. Later, Jesus appeared and obliged him, with this chastisement: "[Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed](#)" ([Jn. 20:29](#)).

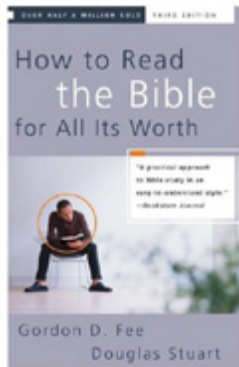
I actually heard a pastor from the pulpit use this verse to fault apologetics. Whatever Jesus meant by His remark, though, He certainly did *not* mean that faith shouldn't be tied to evidence. How do I know? I kept reading. Let's remove the verse numbers and see what we discover.

Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed." Therefore many other signs,⁶ Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (Jn. 20:29-31).

Do you see the problem? If Thomas was wrong for asking for evidence, then why in the very next verse does John say *the purpose of his entire Gospel was to document miraculous evidence* meant to aid belief for salvation? Miraculous signs, after all, are intended to be *seen*.

No, Jesus had something else in mind than the legitimacy of evidence. This insight doesn't clarify Jesus' meaning, of course, but it does seem to eliminate a popular false reading.⁷





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Unfortunately, our inattention as Christians to this contextual consideration has resulted in some serious misunderstandings of key Bible verses. In an attempt to address some of this confusion, Greg has taken to the radio airwaves to apply his trademark hermeneutic principle to some specific passages, providing a model for how Christians should approach such challenges. These radio commentaries are now available here in a single collection. This resource also contains the complete *Never Read a Bible Verse* booklet in PDF.



Ancient Words: Reflections on the Reliability and Proper Use of Scripture, Gregory Koukl – \$11.95

Paperback: 110 pages (BK361)

“Did God really say...?” It's the oldest temptation in human history, one that targets the authority of God's Word at its very foundation. Its modern rephrasing takes many different forms, both in academia and in popular culture: Are the New Testament documents reliable? Have ancient biblical books been lost or suppressed by the early church? Are the words of the Bible just flawed human inventions? These questions introduce doubt at the point of contact between God and man, undermining the Christian's confidence in the words of Scripture.

In this timely collection of essays, apologist Gregory Koukl carefully and lucidly addresses each of these issues, providing both solid evidence for the reliability of Scripture and a clear roadmap for how it should be read and applied. His well-reasoned responses to these popular challenges to biblical authority will help reinforce the Christian's confidence in this trustworthy book.



Bad News about the Good Samaritan

I uncovered the problem with the parable of the Good Samaritan completely by accident. I'd been searching the Gospels to determine the part "social justice" actually played in the teachings of Christ. I discovered that most of the times Jesus mentioned the poor and downtrodden, He was making a point about something else.⁸ This, as it turns out, is the case with the Good Samaritan.



Find the full narrative in Luke 10:25-37. In my Bible, though, the parable is sectioned off from the rest of the text with the title "The Good Samaritan" between verses 29 and 30. Headings like this can be helpful, but they can hinder, too.

Here's our question: Why did Jesus tell the Samaritan tale? Anyone beginning at verse 30, as the heading encourages, is going to miss the point entirely, because it's not in the parable. Yes, there's a lesson about prejudice and

bigotry there, and a powerful picture of compassion and mercy. No question. But that's not the reason Jesus told the parable to begin with. That reason is embedded in an exchange before it, a dialog many neglect because the heading gets in the way.

An expert in the Law asks Jesus what he must do to earn eternal life. Jesus asks what the Law demands. He answers with the two great commandments, for which Jesus commends him. "You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live." Simple enough.

The lawyer needs clarification, though. He asks, "And who is my neighbor?" The reason for his question, though, is the hinge pin of the entire episode. He was "*wishing to justify himself*" (v. 29).

For myself, there has not been a single moment in my 41 years as a Christian that I've kept either of those commands. "You shall love the

Lord your God with all your heart, and with

all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." I'm crushed daily under the intolerable weight of both obligations with no hope of self-vindication. Apparently, though, the lawyer felt more confident, depending, of course, on who Jesus meant by "neighbor." Precisely who did Jesus want him to love as he loves himself? Jesus' answer: Your most despised enemy. Every day. Without faltering, and without failing. "Do this and you will live."

IT'S ABOUT OUR COMPLETE INABILITY TO FULFILL THOSE TWO SIMPLE LAWS AND JUSTIFY OURSELVES.

Jesus was not opining on the virtues of social justice or racial reconciliation or brotherly love or being nice to neighbors. He wasn't talking about goodness at all, but badness. He was talking about the impossibility of self-justification (remember, the lawyer had asked, "What shall *I do* to inherit eternal life?" v. 25).

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a story about the bad news. It's not about the Samaritan's goodness; it's about our badness. It's about our complete inability to fulfill those two simple laws and justify ourselves.

If...My people

I've saved the most controversial passage for last. You're probably familiar with this verse—it might even be a favorite—but before you get fidgety, make note of the ellipsis (...) in the heading above. It signals something has been left out of the citation. Something has been omitted. Such omissions are usually innocuous. Other times, though, they can be deadly to meaning.

Here's how 2 Chron. 7:14 is characteristically quoted:

"If...My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from Heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

The "promise" is cited frequently when Christians gather to pray for their country and its civic leaders, something Scripture both models (Rom. 10:1) and commands (Jer. 29:7, 1 Tim. 2:1-2). Thus, American Christians invoke 2 Chron. 7:14, trusting God will heal a repentant America of its calamities and afflictions. The basic equation is this: If Christians ("My people") repent ("turn from their wicked ways"), God will restore national prosperity ("heal their land").

Oddly, that equation does not seem to square with history. Arguably, the church





was most spiritually robust in the first century, but Jerusalem, the epicenter of vibrant Christianity, was leveled by the Romans in 70 A.D. As Christianity got stronger in the Roman Empire, Rome got weaker, finally collapsing when sacked in 410 A.D. By contrast, the Third Reich was strong in part *because* the church was weak.

The historical pattern does not bear out for a reason. The promise has been misunderstood and, therefore, misapplied. The reason for the confusion is three dangerous little dots. Always beware the ellipses.

The “promise” claimed in verse 14 is only half of a longer grammatical unit (a lengthy sentence, in this case) that begins in verse 13. The shorter citation is misleading because 30 words between “if” and “My” have been replaced by an ellipsis in the way this passage is quoted.⁹ Do you think those words might have some relevance to God’s point? As it turns out, they’re vital. Let’s add the missing pieces:

“Thus Solomon finished the house of the Lord and the king’s palace, and successfully completed all that he had planned on doing in the house of the Lord and in his palace. Then the Lord appeared to Solomon at night and said to him, ‘I have heard your prayer, and have chosen

this place for Myself as a house of sacrifice. If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.’”

Take note of the phrase, “I have heard your prayer.” God’s words here were in response to a specific prayer. What prayer was that? 2 Chron. 6 provides the answer.

2 Chron. 7 is the *second* part of an exchange between Solomon and God. In a night vision, God gives a point-by-point response to specific requests Solomon made during a lengthy petition offered during the temple consecration (6:13-42). Solomon’s prayer in chapter 6 is answered by God in chapter 7.

The chart below matches Solomon’s specific requests with God’s specific response:


Solomon’s Prayer	God’s Response
6:19 “Have regard to the prayer of Your servant, O Lord my God, to listen to the cry and to the prayer which Your servant prays before You.”	7:12 “Then the Lord appeared to Solomon at night and said to him, ‘I have heard your prayer...’”
6:26 “...when the heavens are shut up there is no rain because they have sinned against You...”	7:13 “If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain...”
6:28 “...if there is locust or grasshopper...”	7:13 “...if I command the locust to devour the land...”
6:28 “...if there is pestilence...”	7:13 “...or if I send pestilence among My people...”
6:24,26 “...and if Your people, Israel...pray toward this place and confess Your name and turn from their sin when You afflict them...”	7:14 “...and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways...”
6:25 “...then hear from heaven and forgive the sin of Your people Israel...”	7:14 “...then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin...”
6:25 “...bring them back to the land which You have given to them to their fathers...”	7:14 “...and will heal their land.”
6:27 “...send rain upon Your land...”	



When the narrative is read as a unit, as it should be, the meaning of 7:13-14 is straightforward. This passage is an answer from God to a specific appeal from Solomon that He remove His hand of judgment from the Jews if they repent and seek His mercy (6:24, 25, 27). When God punishes Israel with locust and pestilence, their genuine repentance will bring forgiveness and healing (7:13-14).

Some have sought exegetical cover by taking “My people” to include God’s people in any age, but this simply will not work. If you made a pledge to your son in a letter that opened “My child,” your daughter born later couldn’t claim the promise simply because she was also now your child. Your original intention was to a specific individual under a specific set of circumstances. Any other use would be abuse. It’s simply not what you had in mind when you wrote the letter.

In the same way, 2 Chron. 7:14 is not a blanket promise for anyone considered God’s “people” in any era. Rather, Solomon specifies ten times in the passage that the “My people” in view is “Israel” (cf. 6:14, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32, 33).



“If...My people” is not a promise by God to heal the self-inflicted wounds of American culture. It’s a promise by God to stay judgment against His people, Israel, that’s tied to prior covenant promises to the Jews, specifically God’s promise to David (6:15-17, 7:17-18) and promises regarding the land God gave to the Hebrews (6:25, 27).

There is nothing wrong with praying for America. In fact we should, but 2 Chron. 7:11-14 is not the reason. This provision applies to unique circumstances in Israel’s history, not America’s.

What, then, can Christians take from the narrative? 2 Chron. 6-7 exemplifies a pattern, not a promise, of God’s mercy to those who humble themselves and repent (note Nineveh in Jonah).

Putting This Solid Ground into Action

- Meaning flows from the larger unit to the smaller unit. Always read the context.
- The key to understanding the meaning of any verse comes from the paragraph and chapter, not just the individual words.
- Don’t isolate verses. Ignore chapter and verse divisions and focus on the bigger picture.
- 2 Chronicle 6:7 exemplifies a pattern, not a promise, of God’s mercy to those who humble themselves and repent.

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Stand to Reason Speakers Near You



Greg Koukl

January

5, 12, 19, 26 Living Oaks Community Church, Newbury Park, CA, Time: 7 p.m. Topic: ABC Curriculum class [Contact](#)

28 European Leadership Forum online seminar, Time: 10 a.m. PT Topic: “Ambassadors for Christ: The Essential Skills” [Contact](#)

February

2, 9, 16, 23 Living Oaks Community Church, Newbury Park, Time: 7 p.m. Topic ABC Curriculum class [Contact](#)

21-22 Kingwood Church, Birmingham, AL [Contact](#)

26-1 Faith Beyond Belief, Calgary, AB [Contact](#)



Alan Shlemon

January

7, 14 Mission Hills Church, San Marcos, CA Topic: “Homosexuality: Truth & Compassion,” “Same Sex Marriage & the Future of the Family” [Contact](#)

10 Onnuri Church, San Jose, CA, Time: 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Topic: “Why Should We Trust the Bible?” “Homosexuality: Turth & Compassion” [Contact](#)

21 North Coast Calvary Chapel, Carlsbad, CA, Time: 8–9:30 p.m. Topic: “Same Sex Marriage & the Future of Family” [Contact](#)

22-23 Biola University, La Mirada, CA, Time: 6–9:30 p.m. Topics: “Homosexuality: Truth & Compassion,” “Same Sex Marriage & the Future of Family”

February

8 Bethany Lutheran Church, Long Beach, CA, Time: 9:30 a.m. Topic: “Making Abortion Unthinkable” [Contact](#)

23-28 Faith Beyon Belief Apologetics Conference, Calgary, Canada [Contact: jojo.ruba@faithbeyondbelief.ca](mailto:jojo.ruba@faithbeyondbelief.ca)

20-21 YWAM, Salem, OR Topics: “Tactics in Defending the Faith”, “Truth & Tolerance in a Whatever World”, “Homosexuality: Truth & Compassion”, “Making Abortion Unthinkable” [Contact: tim@missionadventures.net](mailto:tim@missionadventures.net)



Brett Kunkle

January

4 Grace Fellowship Church, Topic: “Why I Am a Christian” [Contact](#)

11 Harvest Christian Fellowship, Riverside, CA, Time: 2:30 p.m. Topic: “The Crisis of our Age: The Postmodern Story” [Contact](#)

23-25 Bethel Church of Houston, Houston, TX, Topic: “Atheist Challenge,” “True for You but Not for Me,” “Dead Men Rising,” “Tactics in Defending the Faith” [Contact](#)

February

1 Grace Christian Fellowship, Costa Mesa, CA, Time: 10 a.m.–12 p.m. Topic: “Why I Am a Christian” [Contact](#)

10 Northwood High School, Irvine, CA, Time: 11:55 a.m.–12:30 p.m. Topic: “Is One Way the Only Way?”

12-14 Great Homeschool Convention, Texas, Topics: TBD [Contact](#)

26-28 Faith Beyond Belief Apologetics Conference, Calgary, Canada [Contact: jojo.ruba@faithbeyondbelief.ca](mailto:jojo.ruba@faithbeyondbelief.ca)

To get information about inviting an STR speaker to your church, email Dawnielle@str.org for Alan or Brett, or Melinda@str.org for Greg.



This is especially true when the appeal is tied to covenant promises.

God's pledge pertaining to Christians is the New Covenant of forgiveness grounded in the final sacrifice of Christ ([Hebrews 10:15-23](#)), but this promise is individual, not national.

More broadly, it can be an encouragement for any country to pray aggressively as Solomon did in light of God's mercy. The same God who answered Solomon might answer other penitents as well.

I close with something I've written elsewhere that sums up the gravity of neglecting the flow of thought of any Bible passage:

Misconstruing a passage neutralizes the Word of God. It robs Scripture of its authority and influence. The entire reason we go to the Bible in the first place—to get God's truth and apply it to our lives—is thwarted when we ignore the context.¹⁰

(Endnotes)

1. This is an important talk and also a short booklet on how to properly interpret the Bible. It's available at [str.org](#).
2. All Scripture references are from the New American Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.
3. Note Matt. 10:19-20, 27-28; Acts 18:8; Eph. 6:19-20; Col. 4:3-4, to cite just a few verses.
4. With a few exceptions, like much of the book of Proverbs.
5. Col. 3:2 and Phil 4:8.
6. I.e., attesting miracles.
7. It could be, for example, that the testimony of Thomas's friends should have been adequate. Jesus, then, would have been faulting a demand for evidence in the extreme, something "skeptics" are prone to.
8. See STR Mentoring Letter, April, 2014. [[link](#)]
9. The NIV and the ESV render the text a little differently (13 "When I shut up the heavens... 14 if my people..."), but the variation does not affect my point. The details of v. 13 are essential to understanding the promise of v. 14.
10. "Silly Putty Bible Study," *Solid Ground*, Sept. 2010. [[link](#)]



Alan Shlemon is available to schedule to teach for your church service, youth group, or conference. Contact STR today for information about Alan and STR's other speakers.

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I USE A SIMPLE RULE TO HELP ME ANSWER THE MAJORITY OF BIBLE QUESTIONS I'M ASKED...

Never Read a Bible Verse

By Greg Koukl

If there was one bit of wisdom, one rule of thumb, one single skill I could impart, one useful tip I could leave that would serve you well the rest of your life, what would it be? What is the single most important practical skill I've ever learned as a Christian?

Here it is: Never read a Bible verse. That's right, never read a Bible verse. Instead, always read a paragraph at least.

My Radio Trick

When I'm on the radio, I use this simple rule to help me answer the majority of Bible questions I'm asked, even when I'm totally unfamiliar with the verse. It's an amazingly effective technique you can use, too.

I read the paragraph, not just the verse. I take stock of the relevant material above and below. Since the context frames the verse and gives it specific meaning, I let it tell me what's going on.

This works because of a basic rule of all communication: Meaning always flows from the top down, from the larger units to the smaller units, not the other way around. The key to the meaning of any verse comes from the paragraph, not just from the individual words.

The numbers in front of the sentences give the illusion the verses stand alone in their meaning. They were not in the originals, though. Numbers were added hundreds of years later. Chapter and verse breaks sometimes pop up in unfortunate places, separating relevant material that should be grouped together.

First, ignore the verse numbers and try to get the big picture. Then begin to narrow your focus. It's not very hard or time consuming. It takes only a few moments and a little observation of the text.

Begin with the broad context of the book. What type of literature is it: history, poetry, proverb? What is the passage about in general? What idea is being developed?

Stand back from the verse and look for breaks in the narrative that identify major units of thought. Ask, "What in this paragraph or group of paragraphs gives any clue to the meaning of the verse?"

There's a reason this little exercise is so important. Words have different meanings in different contexts (that's what makes puns work). When we consider a verse in isolation, one meaning may occur to us. But how do we know it's the right one? Help won't come from the dictionary. Dictionaries only complicate the issue, giving us more choices, not fewer. Help must come from somewhere else close by: the surrounding paragraph.

With the larger context now in view, you can narrow your focus and speculate on the meaning of the verse itself. Sum it up in your own words.

Finally, and this is critical, see if your paraphrase makes sense when inserted in the passage. Does it dovetail naturally with the bigger picture?

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