

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #37: READ THE NEXT VERSE!

By John Temples

The Bible is divided into chapters and verses. That makes it convenient to study and preach, but it also can lead to some erroneous interpretations. Why? Because we tend to subconsciously see the chapter/verse divisions as fences or barriers. We read certain passages and verses in isolation. But the Bible is not a collection of isolated doctrinal “tweets”! Many doctrinal misunderstandings could be avoided if people would just read the context of a verse!

WHY WE SHOULD ALWAYS “READ THE NEXT VERSE”--SOME EXAMPLES

Colossians 2:20-23. A denominational preacher was speaking about the evils of drinking alcohol. He was doing a good job until he quoted Colossians 2:21, saying, “The Bible says, do not touch, do not taste, do not handle.” He left the impression that Paul’s words applied to drinking alcoholic beverages. In doing so, he destroyed his credibility by a wrong use of that passage.

If you read the next verse (and the verse before) you will see why: “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations (do not touch, do not taste, do not handle), which all concern things which perish with the using, according to the commandments and doctrines of men?”

Paul’s point is this: if you have been freed by Christ from certain rules and regulations, why do you keep following them? The context makes it plain that he was referring to the “do not touch/taste/handle” commands of the Mosaic law, as interpreted and annotated by the Jewish rabbis. Paul’s point was, “quit going back to the Old Testament and observing all the Mosaic and Pharisaical restrictions from which you have been freed in Christ.” Colossians 2:21 has nothing to do with drinking alcohol, but with the folly of Christians binding themselves to Old Testament regulations.

2 Peter 1:20. That says in the KJV, ASV, and NKJV, “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.” Sounds like no one, simply by reading an Old Testament prophecy, can understand it! But read the next verse: “For prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

Verse 20 is not talking about how we read Scripture, but rather how the Scripture came into existence. Peter was saying that Old Testament prophecy was not just a product of a prophet’s personal thinking or opinion, but rather a product of divine inspiration.

Some modern translations clear this up:

- “No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation” (NIV, ESV).
- Even the NLT, a paraphrase, gets it right: “No prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet’s own understanding or from human initiative.”

Ecclesiastes 9:5. “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.” From reading this passage in isolation, some religious people have concluded that we cease to exist at death. But if that is true, then so is the next part of the verse: “And they have no more reward.” You just took away the reward of eternal life for the righteous!

But “read the next verse” and you will see the true meaning: “Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done *under the sun*.” The expression “under the sun” is the key to understanding this and many other statements in Ecclesiastes. (Solomon used it 29 times in the book.) “Under the sun” means “in this physical world or life.” Solomon is not saying the dead have ceased to exist, but that they have no more awareness of, or connection with, what is going on in this world.

Acts 16:30,31. The Biblical plan of salvation is misunderstood by many. Most denominations proclaim that salvation is by faith alone; nothing else is required, especially baptism. They point to such passages as Acts 16:30,31--"And he [the Philippian jailor] brought them out and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' So they said, 'believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.'" See, cry the denominationalists, "salvation is by faith only."

But read the next verse: "Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized." The way this is written shows that baptism is part of what the jailor was told to believe. He was told to believe because he was a heathen--he was starting at "ground zero" on the road to salvation.

The same thing is true in **Galatians 3:26,27.** Verse 26 says, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ." "See, faith only," say the denominationalists. But the next verse reads, "FOR [explanatory connecting word] as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." Baptism is obviously a product of faith and has to occur before we can say we are "in Christ."

Matthew 3:11 is an amusing illustration of the need to "read the next verse." John the Baptist says, "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. But He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire--wow, that sounds energizing and exciting! Some modern folks have evidently concluded that being baptized with fire is a good thing. I was walking along a street in downtown Atlanta many years ago and came across a church sign that said "Fire-baptized Holiness Church." If those folks had read the next verse, they might have wanted to change their name! Verse 12 says, "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." John had two groups in view here: those who would believe in Jesus (who would receive the blessing of the baptism of the Holy Spirit), and those who would not (who would therefore receive a "baptism of fire"--eternal punishment in a fiery hell).

A more serious doctrinal misunderstanding is based on **Romans 14:14**: “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself, but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.” “There is nothing unclean of itself” sounds like a license to sin! Many moderns have concluded from this verse that nothing is wrong or sinful unless you think it is.

But read the next verse: “Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.” Paul meant, no FOOD is unclean of itself or sinful to eat; the Mosaic distinction between clean and unclean foods has been abolished. To take a passage dealing with eating habits and apply it to every sinful practice under the sun is indeed mishandling the word of God.

A similar situation occurs with **1 Corinthians 7:17-20**. Verse 17 says, “But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk.” And verse 20: “Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.” Some preachers have erroneously concluded that this means you have God’s permission to remain in whatever life situation you are when you obey the gospel, even a sinful one. This passage has been used to justify remaining in sinful occupations, adulterous marriages, etc.

But read the next verse(s): “Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it, but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise, he who is called while free is Christ’s slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that calling in which he was called.”

The context makes it clear that Paul means if you are called (become a Christian) and are in a life situation that is *not inherently sinful to begin with*, you do not need to change that situation. He gives two examples:

- In verse 18, he speaks of one who is called while circumcised (that is, a Jew). His point is that a Jewish Christian does not need to seek surgical intervention to undo his circumcision.

- In verse 21, he says that if a slave becomes a Christian, he should not view his slavery as a sinful situation and try to escape it.

The key is verse 17--"AS GOD has distributed to each one"--and verse 24, "Let each one remain WITH GOD in that state in which he was called." God did not "distribute" to anyone to be a drug dealer or a thief. So this passage does not give comfort to people in sinful states or permission to remain in those sinful states after becoming Christians.

Sometimes it is prudent to read the verse before. Look at **Proverbs 1:24-28**--
"Because I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded; because you disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my reproof, I also will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your terror comes, when your terror comes like a storm, and your destruction comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call on me, but I will not answer. They will seek me diligently, but they will not find me."

Are these the words of a loving God mocking sinners? Yes, say many preachers. But go back to verse 20: "Wisdom calls aloud outside, she raises her voice in the open squares. She cries out in the chief concourses, at the openings of the gates in the city she speaks her words." Wisdom, personified, is the speaker here, not God.

Reading the next verse can help us avoid even innocent misunderstandings of Scripture. A prime example is **1 Corinthians 2:9**, a verse often quoted at funerals. "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." The language could be applied to our heavenly reward, but that is not the subject of the text.

Read the next verse: "But God has revealed them to us by His Spirit." The "things God has prepared" that Paul spoke of are the blessings of Christianity prophesied in the Old Testament that are ours under the New Testament.

Many erroneous ideas could be corrected and many doctrinal misunderstandings avoided if we would all "read the next verse." The answer to much religious error is

often found right in the text used to justify the error. We need to be precise and correct in our reading and application of Bible passages, making sure to take the context into account. --John Temples