

*2 Timothy 2:15. We've covered many sections of Scripture in our years of Bible studies. We've enjoyed countless discussions and arrived at numerous applications, though in every passage there's only one right interpretation.*

*How do you know what the Bible means? The same way you know what anything means—by carefully studying it. And when studying, nothing is so critical as getting the context right.*

The audience was in the palm of his hand. A pastor was invited onto the set of Trinity Broadcasting Network to share about his life and ministry. He said his ministry of “possibility thinking” was built upon Matthew 19:26, “With God, all things are possible.” He explained that the Lord had given him this verse, because he was born in 1926. That settles it, doesn't it? The pastor had heard from God Himself... or had He?

As you can imagine, others were curious try the same method. The host even tried it. Born in 1934, he realized there wasn't a Matthew 19:34 or even a Mark 19:34. Undeterred, he found a Luke 19:34 which says, “The Lord has need of him.”

The audience erupted with hallelujahs. Indeed, the host rejoiced saying, “I've never had a life verse before... The Lord has need of me! The Lord has need of me!”

If you'd like a life verse, might I recommend a different method? One reason is because of what happened next. The host's wife read a little further and said this verse couldn't belong to her husband. “This verse is talking about a donkey!”

As silly as it may seem, it's a true story—and it's not a unique one, either. Many come to the text of God's Word searching for hidden messages or a word given personally to them for the day. The problem is that a text without its context can mean anything to anyone.

One might use the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30) to argue that Jesus would eliminate the minimum wage. Someone else might counter that the Bible encourages socialism (Acts 2:44-45). After all, shouldn't we help the “least of these” (Matt 25:45)? Some have said that Jesus would support concealed-carry legislation (Lk 22:36), while others say force is always wrong (Matt 5:39). Who's right?

There are 31,102 verses in the Bible. If we strip away the context, we're left with hundreds of thousands of sound bites. Select the bites you like best, string them together, and then say with great authority, “Well, the Bible says...” It's common to do this, and it reminds me of the way negative campaign ads are made: Find a few sound bites of the opponent, string them together, and then say, “Well, the good Senator did say...”

If you're an elected official, you've likely had your words taken out of context more than once. It hurts. Do you think it offends God when the same is done with His written Word? Be careful attaching His Name to your agenda, especially if you didn't do your homework.

Luke 19:34 isn't a great life verse for the same reason Acts 2:44-45 doesn't support socialism: Context. It's often said that chief factor of real estate is: “Location. Location. Location.” Perhaps we could borrow from this? The most important factor to understanding God's Word is: “Context. Context. Context.” Study how a verse fits with the verses around it, the book that contains it, even the broader scope of Scripture to grasp its intended meaning.

### AN APPROVED WORKER

*2 Timothy 2:15—“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”*

Writing at the end of his life to a young pastor, Paul had seen many wrong uses of God's Word. In 2 Timothy, he calls out Hymenaeus and Philetus as examples. By putting their own spin on a certain doctrine, these two had swerved from the truth (2 Tim 2:18). They once taught what the apostles taught, but at some point they started teaching things quite different.

Much of the New Testament had been written by this time and was in circulation. Churches had received different parts, and it was well known what it meant to be a Christian. The core doctrines were no secret. Yet, men like these started introducing their own ideas. They no longer wanted to “rightly handle” God's Word.

It's an interesting phrase—“rightly handle.” The Greek more literally says, “straight cut.” Straight cutting the word of truth. It brings to mind thoughts of precision and accuracy.

# Measure Twice, Cut Once

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Any carpenter can appreciate this phrase. If he cares about the end product, he doesn't start cutting and hope his pieces somehow fit together. Rather, he patiently measures and carefully cuts. Consider the trim in your home—it wasn't cut give or take an inch. You'd have huge gaps on your walls and massive bowing! Would you pay for that? I wouldn't.

And so it is with God's Word. One can't just interpret it however feels right or the pieces of Scripture won't fit together. In fact, the Scripture will appear to contradict itself. Men like Hymenaeus and Philetus had wrongly cut or mishandled God's Word for their own gain. Paul confronted them, but they refused to change. In the end, they peddled a theology of poorly cut pieces.

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**“THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD IN SUCH A WAY THAT WHEN THE BIBLE SPEAKS, GOD SPEAKS” — B.B. WARFIELD.**

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Paul exhorted Timothy to be a worker approved by God, one unlike the two men he named. How? By cutting the Word of God with great precision—working hard to rightly understand it. The result is a theology that fits together, one that Timothy could hold unashamed when he came to stand before the Lord.

## WORDS MEAN SOMETHING

After Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, it went through a few revisions before landing at the throne of King George. When the king read it, the colonists' intentions became painfully obvious to him. There were no hidden or deeper meanings, and the Declaration certainly wasn't an allegory. It meant treason, and the king prepared for war over it.

Suppose you had questions about the Declaration and could ask anyone in history what it meant. Would you ask King George? That might be fun, but I would ask Jefferson himself. He wrote it, didn't he? Who better to ask?

Words mean something, and their meaning is determined by their author (that's why I would ask Jefferson). And no matter what part of the Declaration you choose, there was only one thing intended in each statement—not three or ten or a million—just one.

Now, the Word of God is a written document whose Author also intended something. Select any verse in the Bible, and God intended to convey something to someone. When we study the Bible we aren't asking: “What does this passage mean to me?” We study to figure out what the Author meant.

*Ezra 7:10—“For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel”*

There are many principles for interpreting Scripture (or any given writing). If you would like to rightly handle God's Word, the most important of these is to understand the context. It's not enough to say, “I opened the Bible and prayed about it.” Indeed, pray hard, and then be prepared to study hard.

Suppose you opened your Bible to Isaiah 61:7 which says, “Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion.” Is this a promise for me? If you and I just give God all the pains in our lives, He will give us twice as much back in success and happiness. Oh, it'll preach and many pastors do preach this, but it's based on a sound bite.

God's people felt abandoned by Him as they suffered during the Babylonian Exile. They had sinned greatly—was there any hope left? Had God abandoned them? What about His promises to Abraham their forefather? In such despair, Isaiah's book builds like Handel's *Messiah* to these final chapters. Verse after verse is a beacon of hope that the exile wasn't the end of anything for the Jewish people.

As Christians, we worship and adore the same God as Isaiah. He's faithful and unchanging, serious about sin, yet forgiving. We could say more about God based on Isaiah 60-66, but one thing we must not say is that 61:7 promises success for us. Give this false hope to a hurting man, and he might believe you... until success doesn't come.

A text without its context can mean anything to anyone. It's so sad to me, but real people really do get hurt when they're told God said things that He never said at all. Context matters.