



## Never Read a Bible Verse

Greg Koukl

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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?

Here is an excellent example of how effective this paraphrase technique can be.

### Jesus, the Uncreated Creator

In John 1:1 the writer states plainly that "*the Word was God*". In verse three he provides backup support for this claim. John writes, "*All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being*".

John says the same thing in two different ways for emphasis and clarity: Everything that ever came into being owes its existence to the Word, Who caused it all to happen. If the Word caused all

created things to come into existence, then He must have existed *before* all created things came into existence. Therefore, the Word could not have been created. Jesus is the uncreated Creator, God.

Those who deny the deity of Christ offer this rebuttal, though. *"Wait a minute, Greg. You didn't read the verse carefully. You missed something in the text. Notice the phrase 'apart from Him'. The apostle excludes Jesus from the count. If you said, 'Apart from Billy, the whole family is going to Disneyland' you wouldn't mean that Billy wasn't part of the family, just that he wasn't included in the count. Every member of the family is going to Disneyland with the exception of Billy. In the same way, every created thing was created by Jesus with the exception of Jesus Himself. Jehovah created Jesus first, then Jesus created everything else. Jesus is not God"*.

Note that this rebuttal turns on the ability to replace *"apart from Him"* with the phrase *"with the exception of Jesus"*. Allegedly they're synonymous. Okay, let's try the replacement and see what happens. The verse then looks like this: *"With the exception of Jesus, nothing came into being that has come into being"*.

If your brow is furrowed trying to figure this out, I'm not surprised. The reconstructed phrase is nearly nonsense. Strictly speaking, it means that Jesus is the only created thing that exists. Read it again and see for yourself. Obviously, the phrase *"apart from Jesus"* can't mean *"with the exception of Jesus"*. These phrases are not synonymous.

*"Apart from Him"* means something entirely different. It means *"apart from His agency"*. It's the same as saying, *"Apart from me you'll never get to Disneyland. I've got the car"*. Apart from Jesus' agency, nothing came into being that has come into being. Why? Because Jesus is the Creator. He is God. That makes perfect sense in the context.

Let me give you some other examples.

## Having a "Peace" about It

Colossians 3:15 is a text that is constantly misunderstood by well-meaning Christians. Paul writes, *"And let the peace of Christ rule in your*

*hearts"*. Some have accurately pointed out that the Greek word for *"rule"* means to act as arbiter or judge. They see this verse as a tool for knowing God's will for our lives.

The conventional thinking goes something like this. When confronted with a decision, pray. If you feel a *"peace"* in your heart, go ahead. If you don't feel peace, don't proceed. This internal sense of peace acts like a judge helping you make decisions according to the will of God. A paraphrase might be: *"And let feelings of peacefulness in your heart be the judge about God's individual will for your life"*. Is this what Paul means?

This is a classic example of how knowledge of the Greek can be dangerous if context is not taken into consideration. The word *"peace"* actually has two different meanings. It could mean a sense of inner harmony and emotional equanimity. Paul seems to have this definition in mind in Philippians 4:7: *"And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"*. This is the subjective sense of peace.

The word also has an objective sense. It sometimes means lack of conflict between two parties formerly at war with each other. This definition of peace is what Paul intends in Romans 5:1: *"Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"*. (Note the distinction between the peace of God and peace *with* God in these two verses.)

What sense of peace did Paul have in mind when writing to the Colossians? The Greek gives us no indication because the same word is used in all three cases. Once again, context is king. The specific meaning can only be known from the surrounding material.

In verse 11, Paul says that in the Body of Christ there are no divisions between Greek and Jew, slave and free, etc. He appeals for unity in the body characterized by forgiveness, humility, and gentleness. He then adds that harmony (*"peace"*) should be the rule that guides our relationships.

Paul has the objective sense of peace in mind here – lack of conflict between Christians – not a

subjective feeling of peace in an individual Christian's heart.

This becomes obvious when we join the suggested paraphrases with the context:

*Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let feelings of peacefulness in your heart be the judge about God's individual will for your life, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.*

vs.

*Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let harmony, not conflict, be the rule that guides you, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.*

The first is completely foreign to the context; the second fits right in with everything that comes before and after. In the context of Colossians 3, there is no hint of using internal feelings as a divine stamp of approval on our decisions. Personal decision-making is not the point of the paragraph. Harmony and unity in the Body is.

## "If I Be Lifted Up"

John 12:32 is another case where a phrase can have two widely divergent meanings. It's not uncommon for worship leaders to quote this statement of Jesus: *"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself"*.

We *"lift up"* the Lord when we exalt Him and declare His glory. If we focus on Jesus and ascribe glory to Him, the power of Christ is released to transform the hearts of those listening and they are drawn to Him. This is the meaning the worship leader has in mind, but it isn't what Jesus is talking about.

When we apply our paraphrase test by adding the very next verse, the results look like this: *"And I, if I be exalted before the people, will draw all men to Myself." But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die*" (John 12:32-33).

Oops. Praising Jesus will kill Him? I don't think so. No ambiguity now. In this instance, being *"lifted up"* clearly means to be crucified.

Understanding this phrase in context sheds light on another familiar passage, John 3:14-15: *"And as Moses lifted up [raised in the air] the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up [raised in the air] that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life"*.

Our paraphrase looks like this: *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be crucified that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life"*.

This makes perfect sense. Jesus had to be crucified before salvation could be offered, an appropriate lead-in to the verse that comes next, the most famous salvation verse in the world: John 3:16.

Let's try another.

## "My Sheep Hear My Voice"

Many have taken this statement by Jesus in John 10 [verse 27] to refer to the Christian's acquired ability to *"hear"* God's personal instructions to him. *"Hearing God's voice"* is advocated as a very useful skill that aids optimal Christian living. Allegedly, this is a learned ability one gains as he matures in Christ. It enables him to sense Jesus' will in any given situation as he *"hears"* Jesus' voice.

Jesus has nothing like this in mind, though. I know because of the context surrounding the verse and a key clarification John himself gives early in the chapter. In verse six, John explicitly states that when Jesus speaks of His sheep *"hearing His voice"* He is using a figure of speech.

The word *"voice"*, then, can't actually mean some kind of inner voice because a thing is never a metaphor of itself. It's a picture of *something else*.

Jesus must be referring, in a figure, to something else that the phrase "*hear my voice*" represents. What is it?

The context tells the story. Jesus says, "*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me*", and then adds, "*and I give eternal life to them*" (John 10:27-28). Note the sequence: His sheep hear His voice. They follow Him in response. He then gives them eternal life. Hearing Jesus' voice is a figure of speech for the inner working of the Holy Spirit that leads to our salvation. It results *in* salvation; it's not the result *of* salvation. It's applied here to non-believers destined for the Kingdom, not believers already in the Kingdom.

This makes perfect sense in the broader context of the chapter. The Jews have no trouble *hearing* Jesus' words. They know what Jesus is *saying*. Their problem is that they don't *respond with belief*. Why don't the Jews "*hear*" Jesus by responding with belief? Jesus tells us plainly. They don't "*hear*" because God is not "*speaking*" to them. They are not among the sheep the Father has given to the Son (verse 26).

The voice being referred to here is not the still, small voice of private direction given by God to Christians, but the effective call of the Holy Spirit bringing non-Christians to salvation.

Our paraphrase test comes to our aid once again:

*You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. Mature Christians have the ability to sense My personal direction for their lives and obey it, and as a result I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all....*

vs.

*You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. The ones that the Father gives me – my sheep – are the ones that respond to my message and believe in me, and as a result I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all....*

The first view actually makes salvation dependent

on the ability to get personalized communications from God. The second makes salvation dependent on the Father, which is Jesus' point in the passage.

To Jesus, "*hearing*" God is not an advanced skill one must develop to open lines of communication to the Father. It's a figure of speech. Hearing Jesus' voice is not getting individual, personalized direction. It's getting saved. It's the result of the Father drawing the non-believer into Jesus' arms.

## Daily Bread?

This raises legitimate questions about daily devotionals that build a short message from a single verse. In my view, such quiet-time helps can be inspirational, but they come with an obvious drawback.

Fortunately, the liability can be overcome by remembering our basic rule: *Never read a Bible verse*. Instead, read a paragraph, at least. Always check the context. Observe the flow of thought. Then focus on the verse.

Remember, meaning always flows from the top down, from the larger units to the smaller units. A reflection on a Bible passage from a sermon or a devotional may be edifying, encouraging, and uplifting. If it is not the message of the text, though, it lacks biblical authority even when the quote comes right out of the Word of God.

If you will do this one thing – if you will read carefully in the context applying the paraphrase principle – you will begin to understand the Bible as God intended. Without the bigger picture you'll be lost.

Only when you are properly informed by God's Word, the way it is written in its context, can you be transformed by it. Every piece becomes powerful when it's working together with the whole.

It's the most important practical lesson I've ever learned ... and the single most important thing I could ever teach you.

## For Further Reading:

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