

Life in the Word

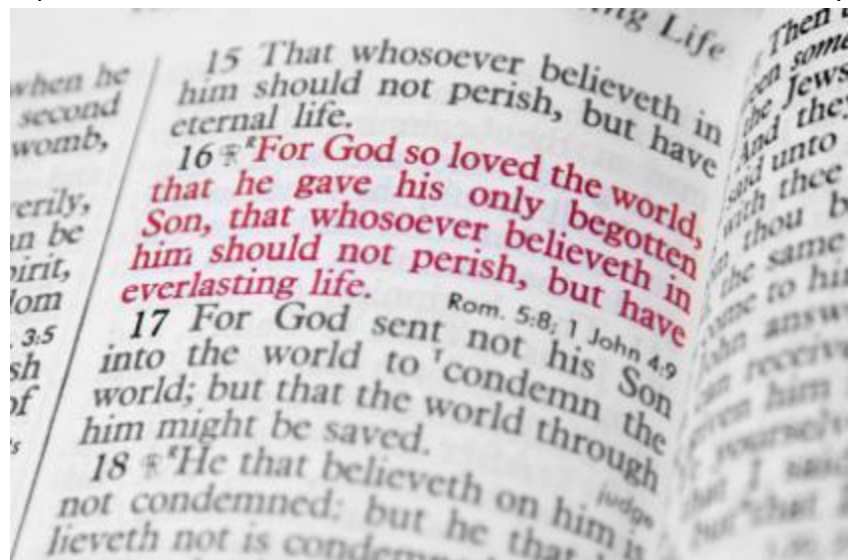
A Ministry of Word of Life Foursquare

Bible Study Tools – Part 8

The Importance of Context

Frequently when reading the Bible, we will see a verse that we've read many times and automatically our thoughts will go a certain direction. If we've heard that scripture used a certain way over and over, or perhaps we memorized a scripture like the one pictured here, John 3:16, it can be difficult to think of it in any other context the one we have already stored. This is human nature and there is nothing wrong with that kind of association. Where we run into trouble is if we get so focused on that one meaning, or that one verse, we lose sight of the whole concept being presented.

During the era of the crusades it was believed that Christianity could be spread through military force simply because of the verse in Matthew 11 that says in part, "...the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." Of course we know now that one cannot force another to believe simply by



applying military pressure. Relationship with God is a matter of faith; not force. Again, many charismatic churches insist that the evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is solely the gift of speaking in tongues. That is based on a scripture in Acts 11 that says, "...the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning...forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ..." and a passage in Acts 10 which says in part, "...on the Gentiles was also poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God..." Similarly some churches refuse to allow musical instruments to be used in worship because of a verse in Colossians 3 which says, "...teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

When we take fragments of scripture out of their context or take passages of scripture out of the context of the whole Bible, it becomes easy to fall into doctrinal error and false teaching. So, here are a few simple rules to use when reading the scriptures to help you avoid this trap.

1. Read the verse in question along with all the corresponding scriptures, i.e. the surrounding paragraph, the whole story in which the verse is included or the chapter that contains the verse.

2. Compare the verse in question with other verses about the same topic (A topical study bible is very helpful in this kind of study). Remember the bible will not contradict itself.
3. If the verse in question is confusing because of symbolism, use this rule of thumb. If it can be taken literally, take it literally until that is not possible. If it cannot be taken literally, take it figuratively using other similar figurative language in the same book of the Bible first, and then the entire Bible, to define what is being said. For instance, in Revelation 12:4 a red dragon takes a third of the stars of heaven and casts them to earth. Clearly stars, which are large gaseous orbs, cannot fall to earth. This could indicate meteors, but if a third of all the meteors in our solar system alone would fall to earth, earth would be obliterated. So, it can safely be said that this verse is not literal. It must then be figurative. The question, as it pertains to the stars, is what does it mean, "a third of the stars"? The answer can be found by looking elsewhere in the book of Revelation first and then the entire Bible second. A study of the word "stars" will reveal figuratively the term stars refers to angels. So the red dragon (here referring to Satan) takes a third of the angels of heaven with him and is cast to earth (see Isaiah 14).
4. Finally, if the verse in question is not clarified by the context of the surrounding verses, keep in mind the purpose of God's word. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." If your understanding of the verse does not line up with these standards, pray for understanding, wisdom and revelation, then read the verse again. When in doubt, seek help from your pastor, a trusted teacher, trusted commentaries or the original languages for clarity. If your understanding still does not line up with the rest of the tone, meaning and message of the Bible, it cannot be correct.