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Dangerous Homefront: Prooftexts We Know and Love

By: John Ferrer

On a recent trip to Washington DC I found myself going through several airports. And with each airport are the inevitable security checks. In one airport I had no problems going through the baggage scan and the metal detectors. But at Laguardia airport I was stopped. I had innocently left a small pocketknife on my key-chain. Not being a terrorist I did not think of a one-inch blade as a weapon. My pocketknife was confiscated. It was not a big loss, but it was enough to teach me something. One airport had let that pocketknife slip by whereas the other one, the one in New York, spotted it instantly. In New York they knew the threat of terrorism. Their sensitivities were triggered and their awareness raised. They knew that a few box cutters can be used to hijack a plane and kill over three thousand people violently awakening an entire nation to the threat of terrorism. While I am no terrorist and I miss my little pocketknife I am glad that the airport security was as tight as it was. New York is safer because of it, and so is America. What was the difference between those two airports? Both knew that plane crashes are a real threat. Both had probably undergone the same security regulations training. Both had to adopt heightened security standards since 9/11. Both see thousands of passengers every day. But in New York they took their job a little bit more seriously; they had to. The danger was not only real, but obvious, and it had been recently demonstrated in the somber living colors of gray dust and red blood.

In the Christian church how often do we allow dangerous elements to slip under our radar? What bad interpretations of the Bible have we adopted because we did not let their imminent threat rouse us to action? As tragic a disaster as 9/11 was, more hangs in the balance when it comes to Biblical interpretation. Here eternal souls are the bounty. Here whole denominations are tottering. Here is where God's voice is most clearly heard. But in spite of the gravity of this issue, God's Word is still constantly mishandled, even within circles of well-meaning Christians. Let us look at a few examples. As you will see, Biblical apologetics is not just for counteracting cults. It is quite useful for cleaning house within the Church.

1 Chron. 4:9-10¹

9 Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, "Because I bore [him] in pain." 10 And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, "Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep [me] from evil, that I may not cause pain!" So God granted him what he requested.

You know this passage well. It is the Prayer of Jabez. We need not comment here on the almost cultic phenomenon surrounding the book by this title. But this verse deserves a rehearing because it is often misrepresented. First, the story is descriptive and not prescriptive. In other words, the story describes what did happen not necessarily what should happen,

especially in our day and age. Second, the passage is much too brief and interjectory to sustain the volumes of theologizing that have been put upon it. Were the passage enriched by a greater historical or circumstantial context or perhaps prescriptive in nature, then more could be said of it. But as it stands, there are only two verses in Scripture which deal with Jabez (1 Chron. 4:9, 10) and one verse that mentions a city by that name (1 Chron. 2:55).² Third, the common interpretation that Jabez's prayer is somehow special in its profound insights on blessing is undermined by the facts that Jabez could equally have been blessed for his being "honorable" or for his being an otherwise cursed person under a name that means "pain", for God has always had a heart for the "nobodys" and the "underdogs."³ The prayer may have been mentioned to demonstrate how God blessed in spite of Jabez's words rather than because of them. Fourth, perhaps the most troubling thing about the way this passage has been handled is that it is used as a magic formula, as if there are magic prayers that unlock God's stored up blessings. The text makes no suggestion that this prayer is prescriptive nor that it mechanically brings about the desired affect. Prayer for Jabez works just as it does for us, it is a relational activity that should be God-centered and whose results are guaranteed only to fit what God wants, whether or not men agree.⁴

Isa. 53:5

But He [was] wounded for our transgressions, [He] [was] bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace [was] upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.

This verse, or at least the last line of it, "by His stripes we are healed," is often quoted in reference to physical healing from diseases and disorders. However, this passage is talking about eternal salvation. Usually the common error in cases like this is to flatten out one's soteriology (theology of salvation) reading eternity into every earthly deliverance, but here the opposite is done. Isaiah 53 is one of the clearest Messianic and soteriological passages in Scripture. The nature of Christ's eternally redemptive work is explained in this prophecy. To reduce this passage to physical healing is to say that Christ died on the cross so you wouldn't have back trouble. Or Christ rose from the grave to deliver you from migraines. But the whole thrust of this passage is that the Messiah is not simply assuming the pains and sufferings of the world on her behalf, he is bearing the load of her sin-punishment. In summary, the thrust of this entire chapter is that the Christ dies a substitutionary death for the atonement and spiritual redemption of men. Were a person to make an argument from Scripture for physical healings today, they would do better finding his support elsewhere.

Psalm 118:24

This [is] the day [which] the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

The passage is often cited as a reminder that God makes every day and we should be glad about this fact. One might hear this verse quoted, perhaps in hymn form or in a prayer, bright and early Sunday morning as a commencement for the day's worship service. But this verse is not referring to just any day, but one day in particular. If we examine the larger passage we can find another memorable line in verse twenty-two, "The stone [which] the builders refused is become the head [stone] of the corner." This memorable verse would be repeated by the Apostle Peter hundreds of years later in 1 Peter 2:7 with specific reference to the ministry and work of Christ as a foundation for the building of the church. Furthermore, Psalm 118:22 suggests that this

“day” refers to the day of salvation, and indeed the larger context of Psalm 118 agrees with this interpretation.⁵ The Psalmist is celebrating God’s work of salvation and, in verse twenty-four, the particular day in which it occurs.

Prov. 29:18

Where [there is] no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy [is] he

The word *hazon* interpreted as “vision” is often misunderstood to mean a “vision” in the business sense of goal setting and planning. In church settings the idea is usually that chaos erupts when the church does not have a set ministry plan. But such an interpretation misrepresents the word *hazon*, for the word refers to divine communication to prophets.⁶ And that “business” interpretation disregards the basic parallelism within this verse.⁷ The first line tells of perishing for lack of vision.⁸ But the second line of the verse explains the object of this vision when it says, “But he that keepeth the law, happy is he.” The vision concerns the law, specifically God’s standard as revealed through the prophets. And for those who do not have the law, it is implied that they do not keep it and suffer unhappiness.

Matt. 7:1

Judge not, lest ye be judged.

This is perhaps the most quoted verse of Scripture surpassing even John 3:16. Whereas the love of God as succinctly portrayed in the one-verse Gospel message of John 3:16 was once considered ethically beautiful and a thing to be shared and enjoyed. Now abstaining from “passing judgment” has come to be viewed as the most prized ethic. But this verse does not promise freedom from judgment. For all will eventually be judged by God (Revelation 20:11-15). Nor does it even disbar judgment between believers (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 1:20). Rather, in context, this verse cautions against hypocrisy. For the passage that follows chastises the hypocrite who attempts to remove a speck from another man’s eye when all the time there is a plank in his own (Matt. 7:1-5). This verse communicates a boomerang effect to one’s actions consistent with the rest of the Sermon the Mount in which this verse appears.⁹

Matt. 10:28

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

The problem that rides on this verse is that Satan gets too much credit. One may think, from this verse, that Satan is the one to fear, the one who can “destroy both soul and body in hell.” This misunderstanding seems to be more the product of poor theology than malicious exegesis. For the One who is truly Lord over Hell is not Satan but God (1 Chron. 29:11-14; Ps. 103:19). God is sovereign over everything—hell included. Satan is but a prisoner; God is the warden (Job 1:6-12; Rev. 20:1-3, 10). God is to be feared above all else, even Satan.

Matt. 18:19-20

Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

This little passage is one of the most victimized in all of Scripture. First, this verse is often used to justify all shades of “health and wealth” theology, namely the belief that God must give believers *whatever* they ask (no matter how self-centered it may be) as long as they ask God in groups. The second offense is a little more innocent. Christians often quote verse twenty as an invocation of God’s presence be it at prayer meetings, worship services, or whatever else. The answer to both of these problems is, again, context. Matthew 18:15-20 is about church discipline. And the reason the numbers “two or three” are mentioned is because those are the numbers of witnesses that were to be brought to testify in the case of a legal or otherwise religious offense. To prevent “he said she said” arguments, two or three witnesses were to be brought in to establish a true testimony (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Hebr. 10:28). Moreover, since only God has the authority to judge (Deut. 32:39; Rom. 12:19), any human judgment over other men was to be done only with God’s conferred authority. And in these verses we see God conferring His authority for judgment only to groups of believers, that is, to a church, the “body of Christ.” God’s presence to creation is a universal fact (Ps 139:7-12; Jer. 23:23-24; Acts 17:27-28). So He hardly needs to be invoked at prayer meetings or at church services (recognized, yes, but not invoked). His presence is mentioned here in reference to His conferring authority to believers for the exercising of judgment within the church.

Eph. 5:22

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.

The main problem with the interpretation of this verse is how much is irresponsibly shoved into the tiny little word “submit.” Oddly enough, in the Greek the word “submit” is nowhere in this verse. Nonetheless, the word is inferred, but as a carry over from the previous verse which is addressed to the whole church, “Submitting (*hupotassomenoi*) yourselves one to another in the fear of God” (Eph. 5:21).¹⁰ Whatever submission may mean in Ephesians 5:22 (and there is not enough room in this article to fully address that issue), it is to be found first as a mutual submission characterizing the entire church, every spouse included.

Rev. 3:15-16

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. 16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

These verses do not mean that God prefers spiritual coldness (disbelief, hostility, inactivity, uselessness) to lukewarm spirituality (hypocrisy, casual Christianity). That interpretation would mean that God wills disbelief (or hostility, inactivity). Thus God not only permits disbelief, but He prefers it. That is, He wants it. This idea is dangerous enough in that it suggest that God is guilty of evil, but it also presents a stiff challenge to Scriptures such as 1 Timothy 2:4 which says, “[God] wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” Such a misinterpretation also suffers contextual blindness. John was addressing the wealthy Church of Laodicea which was inconveniently located south of Heiropolos, known for its therapeutic hot springs, and north of Colossae with its cold refreshing waters.¹¹ Laodicea, not having an adequate water source of its own brought it in from outside sources. Thus the water they acquired was lukewarm and dirty by the time it reached them. John, therefore, is drawing

the contrast between the therapeutic hot springs and the revitalizing cold springs—both good options—and between these two is the fetid lukewarm water of Laodicea.

Rev. 3:20

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

Usually this verse is taken to be an evangelistic invitation, however the context reveals that John is still talking to the Church at Laodicea. That is, John is addressing believers. This knocking and calling is not unto salvation, for that much is already assured to these believers. Instead the invitation is to a deeper fellowship with God.

So What's the Big Deal?

Clearly, misinterpretation occurs often within the Church. Does that mean that the church is apostate or heretical? Not really, but it does mean that we make mistakes. Many of these mistakes go unnoticed and never cause any real damage. But other mistaken interpretations do sink in and take root springing up into dangerous beliefs and practices. Consider how many people have watched a loved one pass away, even though they prayed in groups for God to heal them, and, as a result, their faith was shattered (see Matt. 18:19-20 above). Or consider how many people think that the Bible instructs them to fear Satan, and as a result, they have developed a paranoid superstition over Satan's abilities despite the fact and assurance of God's sovereignty (see Matt. 10:28). And even well intended misinterpretation such as the evangelistic use of Revelation 3:20, can cause trouble. If people are won to Christ through misinterpretation what precedent does that set for their continued growth in prayer and Bible Study? Can men willfully disrespect God's Word and still respect God?

Sound interpretation is important for what good is an inerrant Word if we disregard the available correctives to keep our interpretation true? And even though God can guide and preserve orthodoxy, we should not be so presumptuous as to assume that the Holy Spirit will always make up for our interpretational mistakes, especially when we should already know better than to make those mistakes. God has provided man with an inspired inerrant Word, and He has provided enough resources (natural and spiritual) to access and apply it. We are in no place to deal half-heartedly with such a precious revelation as God's Word for if we dare to misinterpret it then we flirt with bad theology. And bad theology is idolatry.

Basics of Interpretation

And what then are some of these correctives that we have to help us in interpreting Scripture? Below are a few key principles to keep in mind as you study God's Word.

- 1) Context, Context, Context
Respect historical, cultural, circumstantial, and textual context (that is, the larger passage). These help keep your interpretation well oriented and well anchored.
- 2) The Bible can never mean what it never originally meant.
Any given passage will have only one meaning. That is the normal mode of communication. This meaning may have endless applications, multiple sub-points, wordplays and metaphors, but the meaning it once had is the one meaning

it always has. Without this boundary line there is little defense against the various interpretations offered by cult groups, the apostate, or schismatic Christians.

3. When we share common particulars with the audience being addressed God's word to them is the same as it is to us.
This rule deals in application guiding us in the right uses of God's word. Where our particulars differ from that of the original audience, then we cannot directly apply that element of that passage of Scripture.
4. Scripture interprets Scripture
The Bible is a big book and for most topics there are at least a handful of passages that will apply in some manner. Consider the overall Biblical message by comparing verses and passages within Scripture. And where new or unfamiliar passages arise, let the already understood passages serve in the sound interpretation of the rest of Scripture.
5. Let the clear passages predominate.
Some passages will stand out as clear and accessible. Let these passages provide guidance in the interpretation of related, but more difficult passages.
6. If the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense, lest you end up with nonsense.
Much of Scripture is readily understandable to the honest reader. Let Scripture speak out clearly as much as possible and seek no other sense unless the Scriptures themselves defy such a ready interpretation.

Conclusion

If you have found yourself setting off the Christian metal detectors by innocently retaining potentially harmful misinterpretations, then hopefully these principles will help you in future study. But you will probably find out soon (if you have not already) that even the best interpreters can benefit from some outside resources. For a good introduction to interpretation see *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart.¹² For some free Bible study software see www.e-sword.org and www.freebiblesoftware.com. And you may also want to invest in some more specialized resources as well.¹³ These materials range from free, to costing an arm and a leg. But, whatever the cost, they may yet prove to be of eternal value.

In closing, it must be said that though interpretation can be very difficult, most of its difficulty is simply our impatience and pride. We can, therefore, solve most of our mistakes in interpretation by patiently and humbly searching out the meaning of a text as we suspend our immediate impressions and test out possible understandings. True, many passages will remain debatable and even mysterious. But on the whole Scripture is clear enough for us to believe, practice, and communicate the true Biblical Christian faith. As guardians of the faith, we should be like the security personal at Laguardia airport taking our job seriously. Keep the big picture in mind, including all the various dangers, so that you take seriously your job as a guardian of the faith. God's Word is weighty and powerful. Handled poorly it can be a disaster, but handled wisely it is the very power of God to change the world.

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¹ Since many misinterpretations have ties to the KJV, or at least were first proliferated under the KJV-popular era, all Scripture verses are from the KJV unless otherwise noted.

² James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Lynchburg, VA: Old Time Gospel Hour, n.d), 534.

³ This point hardly needs defense. Nonetheless for God's Word as it concerns the care of the poor, destitute, and otherwise "lowly" see: Ex 22:25-27; 23:11; Le 19:9, 10; 23:22; 25:25-28, 35-37, 39-43; De 14:28, 29; 15:2-14; 24:12-21; 26:12, 13; 1Sa 2:7; Ne 8:10; Job 5:15, 16; 31:15; 34:18, 19, 28; 36:6, 15; Ps 9:18; 10:14; 12:5; 14:6; 34:6; 35:10; 37:21, 26; 41:1-3; 68:10; 69:33; 72:2, 4, 12-14; 74:21; 102:17; 107:9, 36, 41; 109:31; 112:4, 5, 9; 113:7, 8; 132:15; 140:12; 146:5, 7; Pr 22:2, 22, 23; 28:27; 29:7, 13; 31:9, 20; Ec 5:8; Isa 1:17; 11:4; 14:30, 32; 16:3,4; 25:4; 29:19; 41:17; 58:7, 10; Jer 20:13; Eze 18:7, 16, 17; Da 4:27; Zep 3:12; Zec 7:10; 11:7; Mt 5:42; 11:5; 19:21; 25:35, 36; Mr 14:7; Lu 3:11; 4:18; 6:30; 7:22; 11:41; 12:33; 14:12-14; 16:22; 18:22; 19:8; Ac 20:35; Ro 12:8, 13, 20; 1Co 13:3; 16:1,2; 2Co 6:10; 9:5-7; Ga 2:10; 6:10; Eph 4:28; 1Ti 5:9, 10, 16; Heb 13:3; Jas 1:27; 2:2-9, 15, 16; 5:4; 1Jo 3:17-19. *Naves Topical Bible* (No Bibliographical Data given) in *Gramcord* [CD ROM] (Vancouver, WA; Gramcord Institute, 1998), "Poor."

⁴ The intimacy of the Psalms, which themselves tend to be as much prayers as songs, bear witness to the personal and relational nature of prayer. And it is a plain fact that prayers often go unanswered or at least answered with a "No." But God's also accomplishes everything He intends to accomplish (1 Chron. 29:11-14; Ps. 104:27-30; Isa. 14:24, 26-27; 55:11). Therefore prayer is only guaranteed to bring about the desired results when those desired results align with God's plans. Furthermore, the only prayer in the New Testament era that can be argued as a formulaic prescription is the Lord's Prayer found in Matt. 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. But even this appears more to be an outline rather than a formulaic prescription, for of all the prayers to be found in the rest of Scripture, nowhere else is the Lord's Prayer repeated verbatim.

⁵ "Salvation" refers here both to temporal salvation (IE: "earthly deliverance") and eternal salvation. Psalm 118 is rich with imagery of God's immanence and direct earthly salvation. Indeed, temporal salvation is the predominant kind suggested in Psalm 118 but in verse nineteen the setting begins to shift saying, "Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them, [and] I will praise the LORD, 20 This gate of the LORD, into which the righteous shall enter. 21 I will praise thee: for thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation." This reference to "gates of righteousness," like the "gates" in Psalm 100:4, suggest God's abode. And the Petrine interpretation of Psalm 118:22 as seen in 1 Pet. 2:7 bolsters this interpretation. Indeed the Psalmist believes God to be his savior in warfare, but also His savior unto heaven. For more on the Ancient Hebrew expectations of the Kingdom of Heaven see Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona, IN: BMH, 1987).

⁶ Allen P. Ross notes, "The word *hazon* refers to divine communication to prophets (as in 1 Sam 3:1) and not to individual goals that are formed The prophetic ministry was usually in response to the calamitous periods, calling the people back to God-- *hazon* meaning revelatory vision should be retained. If there is no revelation from God, people can expect spiritual and

political anarchy (Alden, p. 202).” Allen P. Ross, *Proverbs in Expositor’s Bible Commentary Vol. 8* [CD ROM] (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), Prov. 28:19.

⁷ Parallelism is the pairing of related lines for literary affect be it emphasis, contrast, development, cause and affect, question and answer, etc. For excellent studies on Hebrew parallelism see James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1981); and Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*.

⁸ The term for “perish,” *para* means to “let go,” “unbind,” or “uncover” and is variously rendered as “unrestrained” (NASB), “cast off restraint” (NIV, ASV, NKJV), or “made naked” (Young’s Literal)! Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, Reprint from the 1906 ed., 7th printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003) 828, Strongs #6544.

⁹ This boomerang affect is visible in Matthew 6:14-15, “For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (See also Matt. 7:2, 12).

¹⁰ Kurt Aland, and others, eds. *The Greek New Testament* 4th rev. ed. 8th printing (Germany: United Bible Societies, 2004).

¹¹ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* Rev. Ed. in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 109-10.

¹² 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). A good introduction to literary hermeneutics is Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature . . . and Get More Out of It* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). Also good is, Grant R. Osborne's *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1991). This edition would probably have benefited from collaboration with specialists in philosophy and related fields, but overall this text is strong. Unfortunately many evangelical texts disqualify themselves from safe recommendation because they deny objective Biblical interpretation. For more on this issue see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 1-195 and Thomas A. Howe, *Toward a Thomistic Theory of Meaning* [Master's Thesis] (Charlotte, NC: Independently Published, 2000).

¹³ The standard Greek Lexicon is W. Bauer, trans. and rev. by W.F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F.W Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979). The standard Hebrew lexicon is that of F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs (cited above in endnote 8). And the standard concordance is James Strong, ed. *The New Exhaustive Concordance* (Nashville: Nelson, 1985). One tremendously helpful Bible program is GRAMCORD [CD Rom] (see endnote 3). This program allows not only for word searches among different translations and in the original language but it also allows for searches of phrases and grammatical constructions. Some helpful sources for commentary on difficult or misrepresented Scriptures include Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook on Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992); and Walter C. Kaiser and others, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996).