

## WEDNESDAY BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

Christ Church, Crouch End Hill

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No: 62

### UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE II

#### Context of Plain and Normal Meaning

##### Review

We have already considered (in our last study) that the **law of context** underlies all other rules of Bible study.

- How can one simple idea be so critical to our understanding of the Bible?

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We further expanded this rule to "**Context of the immediate setting**".

- How did we interpret 1 Peter 3:3 often misquoted as saying "The bible says that it is wrong to wear jewellery".

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##### Introduction

Imagination and curiosity are powerful tools of the Bible student as long as they are tied to the text "Emptying words of their plain meaning and filling them with spiritual content doesn't honour the words nor the Author of the Bible."

- Do you agree or disagree? Why?

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Read Numbers 22. According to this familiar account the donkey on which a disobedient prophet was riding became frightened when she saw an angel with a drawn sword. The donkey lurched sideways, crushed the foot of her owner against a rock, refused to go any farther; and complained to her rider in complete sentences.

Many interpretations out of context abound:

- Because donkeys don't talk, some might say this is simply a parable meant to show that even dumb animals sometimes make more sense than their human owners. Others, however; could claim deeper truths.
- For example, someone might point out that the story of Balaam and the donkey is actually a visualization of what happens when we find ourselves faced with the pains of self-conflict. To illustrate this internal struggle, the crushed foot represents the physical pain we often incur in the process of acting against our own conscience. The talking donkey depicts how our own stubborn thoughts can turn around and talk back to us. Then there's the angel. That's our human spirit. At the right moment it intervenes with our plans, startles our troubled mind, and talks to us from a different level of consciousness.

**The trouble with the above interpretation is that it says far more about the imagination of the interpreter than about the text.** More seriously, such imagination, as spiritual as it may sound, actually twists, ignores, and denies the real meaning of the word of God. Emptying words of their plain meaning and filling them with spiritual content doesn't honour the words nor the Author of the Bible

**The trouble with "spiritualizing is that it can cause us to miss what God is really saying to us.**

The story of Balaam and the donkey isn't treated by the text as a parable. Neither is it about personal internal conflict, even though that is in the text. The plain, normal language of the text calls for us to interpret it as a real historical narrative. It presents a record of real events that show **Gods miraculous ability not only to deal with a rebel prophet but, more important, His ability to miraculously bless and preserve His chosen people Israel. It also shows that God has the ability to use anything He has created for His purpose.**

## **The Normal Meaning Of Figures Of Speech**

We use word pictures in everyday conversation not to hide our ideas but to express them. Take for example the expression, "I'm getting cold feet." **Context and normal usage make its meaning obvious.** If a person were to make this statement while ice fishing, and just before saying, "I'd wish I'd worn that other pair of socks," it would have a literal meaning. But if someone were to say these words a couple of days before signing papers for a home mortgage, we could probably assume that something else was in view, especially if the person then said, "I'm going to refigure our budget."

**We use figures of speech because, even in a conversation, a picture is worth a thousand words.**

When read in context, there is usually a plain and ordinary sense to figurative and symbolic language. In many cases, the Bible even immediately explains its own symbolism. But what if the intent of the author is not clear? What if it's not clear whether the Bible is using words in a plain or figurative sense? Then the safest rule is to go with the literal meaning of the text in its immediate context. Because of the integrity of Scripture, we can be confident that the ultimate truth in view will correspond to the plain and ordinary sense of the words. "Good fruit" won't mean "bad results."

### **Consider James 3: 17**

Is the Bible saying that "studying for knowledge isn't necessary?"

In considering this verse, apply the rule of "immediate context" by answering the questions:

- Who is the author? To whom is he writing? Why? When? Where? How? Wherefore?
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- In considering words in their "plain and normal meaning," what do you think are the key words in this verse? Why?
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- How does the context tell us that wisdom "from above" differs from wisdom that is rooted here on earth?
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## **Going Further**

### **Refer**

Compare the wisdom described in James 3:17 with that seen in James 1:3-8. How, in both cases, is wisdom seen as coming from God?

### **Reflect**

As you consider the danger of using Scripture out of context, can you name additional examples of wrongly taking Bible verses out of the context that helps give them their meaning?

- Do you feel that the Bible is a difficult book to read and understand? Why or why not? Should we read the Bible in the same way that we read the newspaper or a novel?
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The second rule of context says that the language of the Bible can be taken at face value. The Word of God does not have to be decoded to find deeper, hidden meanings. When studied and interpreted in context, the authors of Scripture say what they mean and mean what they say.

God has given us the Bible and wants us to understand it so that we can know Him better. If this is the desire of your heart, spend a few moments in prayer right now asking Him to use this study to draw you closer to Him.