

CARING



APPEARING NOWHERE IN SCRIPTURE

A SCRIPTURE STUDY FROM *CARING*

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INTRODUCTION



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Christians often misunderstand, misquote or misuse verses in the Bible. We allow media and art to provide the mental imagery. I am guilty and so are you. It is just so easy to search for a topic, read it in our language—thousands of years away from its context—and apply it, adding in a dash of our own biases, worldviews and clever memes. And it is sometimes as simple as information becoming by virtue of believing it to be so. There's a ripple effect as larger and larger groups of people say, "Yes. Sure. Absolutely...I think."

For example: Did you know that while the Bible tells us about angels, it never mentions that they have wings or that people become angels when they die? And I'm sad to say they never sang at Jesus' birth, but rather spoke their announcement. We've all sung the Christmas carol for so long that we are sure that "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

Here's the truth: Angels are God's "messengers." They differ from the four-faced, four-winged cherubim and six-winged seraphim (translated as "the burning ones"), who are creatures of a different sort. The role of seraphim and cherubim is to sit at the throne and worship God, while appearing quite spectacularly in visions, including Ezekiel's. But I'm afraid that those sweet, innocent babies with wings painted on cathedrals worldwide do not ever appear in Scripture. Not once.

Already, you may be clenching your jaw—or worse yet—fists, awaiting a challenge of your deeply held beliefs. It is not my intention here to offend, but to look beyond our reckless culture-clash theology. As a disclaimer, I do want to let you know that I have never spoken to an angel, so the possibility that I am wrong exists, and yet I want to be faithful to the Word we are given.

In this study series, we will look deeper at commonly misunderstood Scripture for important context to find a faithful interpretation of God's Word.

We believe that all 66 books of the Bible were inspired and authored by God through human writers, so we understand the Scriptures in their original manuscripts are without fault and error. The Bible is not a collection of quotes and great one-liners. It is literally the Word of God. When the Bible speaks, God is speaking. Therefore, we approach the Bible with care and intentionality.

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PART 1: PHILIPPIANS 4:13 IS NOT ABOUT PERSONAL SUCCESS



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BEHIND THE SCENES

Read what Scripture says in Philippians 4.

BEYOND THE SURFACE

You know the verse. You've heard it time and time again. It's perhaps the world's most misquoted Scripture. *I can do all things through him who strengthens me* (Phil. 4:13).

Yet, this verse has nothing to do with personal success or endeavors. It was never meant to be used as the athlete's mantra. Paul did not write this line to be used as a confirmation that God stands behind your specific plans. **There is so much more!**

The book of Philippians was written from a dark prison cell and delivered by Epaphroditus, a bond-slave, to the house-church in Philippi where those facing death for their faith were reading every word and holding on to grace and the hope of Christ in desperate times.

Paul had been chained, beaten, lived in poverty and yet he rejoiced. How is this possible? He rejoices? Really?

Paul says he can be content because **he knows where supernatural strength comes from.** That strength that shows up in the dark hours of the night when it seems that tomorrow will never come. It is faith and trust beyond reason; contentment come what may.

This is deeper and more important for us to grasp than we can conceive. In context, this verse is part of a chapter that is embedded into a book and is given to a particular audience that was on the verge of the entire world changing while facing the imminent death of their church founder. Paul is providing a treatise on courage that will sustain them on days when their world seems to be falling apart. And there is contentment in a circumstance that is unthinkable. Here's where the truth of this verse absolutely comes alive; Paul is saying:

"I can do this."

"I can go through my painful, dark day."

"I can face my future, no matter what the outcome."

"I can do all this through him who gives me strength."

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And as he writes these words he frames hope for those who are also facing uncertainty. "You can face tomorrow, too!" This is ours because of the supernatural strength that only comes from Christ.

Further backup:

- Acts 20:30. Scripture will be distorted by false teachers, even from inside the church.
- Isaiah 6:2, Ezekiel 1:23 (Seraphim), Ezekiel 10:1-20; I Samuel 4:4; Psalm 80:1; Ezekiel 1:10 and 41: 18,19 (Cherubim). There are fallen and unfallen angels.
- Daniel 10:21, 12:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; Jude 1:9; Revelation 12:7-10. Gabriel is one of the principal messengers of God, his name meaning "hero of God." He was entrusted with important messages such as those delivered to Daniel (Daniel 8:16, 9:21), to Zechariah (Luke 1:18-19), and to Mary (Luke 1:26-38).
- Philippians 4:4-13 for a broader look at verse 13.

BETWEEN THE LINES

- It has been said that there are two great dangers facing believers internationally today: Poverty and wealth. The danger with poverty is that one becomes so discouraged with God. Those with wealth become self-sufficient apart from God. What do you think is the greatest danger facing Christians today?

- Our interpretation of Scripture is influenced by our experiences and worldview. For example: A man who knew a Christian with bad behavior decides Christians can never be trusted...ever. What are your thoughts on this?

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- Our interpretation of Scripture can be flawed by picking and choosing topical verses to apply to our lives. What can be done to better represent God's Word?

- What deeper meaning does Philippians 4:13 take on, knowing Paul's circumstance and the broader implications for the suffering church?

- Can you say with Paul, "I have the secret of contentment?" Why?

- Today you may need God's strength as you face a situation (relationally, financially, spiritually, economically, psychologically) where you are overcome with overwhelm. You are not alone; God promises to be with you in the "deepest waters." Philippians 4:13 is for you today.

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PART 2: MATTHEW 18:20 IS NOT ABOUT ENCOURAGING THE FAITHFUL



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BEHIND THE SCENES

Read what Scripture says in Matthew 18.

BEYOND THE SURFACE

In part one, we looked at Christians' misunderstanding, misquoting and misusing of verses from the Bible. We acknowledge together that "we share guilt" in this regard. It is just so easy to search for a topic, read it in our language—thousands of years away from its context—and apply it, adding in a dash of our own biases, worldviews and clever memes.

Years pass. Then decades...centuries. Before you know it, someone "wise" writes up new rules for conduct and methods to reflect our long-held "slightly skewed" beliefs.

Consider the following:

- Nowhere in the Bible are we told that women cannot wear pants or use makeup. (I shudder!)
- Nowhere, including Proverbs 31, are we told that women should only work in the home.
- Nowhere do we find a command that baptism must be by submersion—Paul was baptized in a home where it would have been highly unlikely that there was water deep enough to accomplish this.
- Nowhere do we read about a chariot taking Elijah up into heaven (instead, a "whirlwind").
- Nowhere do we find that the devil has horns, red skin or a pitchfork.
- And please tell me where you see an account of an actual "battle" at Armageddon? They gather for battle, but we do not read that anything happens.

I know, your mind is blown and hours of late-night discussion are now possible.

There are limitless media platforms for "false teachers" sharing their new interpretation of Scriptures. Half-truths and added truths are not **the Truth**, and followers become deluded or lost in culture. Worst case scenarios exist in the shadows where someone moves far enough away

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from context that there is a danger of radicalization and weaponized belief systems.

While this will not be the theme of our lessons, we must acknowledge extremism.

For this lesson, we will refocus on the context of a dearly misquoted favorite: *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”* (Matt. 18:20).

I remember the heartfelt words of a retired pastor who told of days long ago, when time had been taken to prepare a sermon, to study, pray and make sure the chapel and facilities were spotless. Bulletins were printed, cookies and coffee in place. He lamented his efforts looking back to this time in his life—as only he and his wife attended their morning worship.

“But, we were faithful,” he said, sighing. *“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them,”* he said, quoting Matt. 18:20. We nod our heads.

This is where it gets hard because we all connect with the “faithful”—those giving their all and seeing results that are hard to measure. This verse, over time, has been used as an encouragement to offer reassurance and strength to go on.

But let’s be honest. There are also those who take this verse and really give it a workout—misquoting it as justification for staying away from Church altogether. Why? They can worship at home with those whom they love, while the Super Bowl is playing in the background. God is certainly in this place, right? Out in nature, four-wheeling perhaps? It’s all the same, isn’t it? God is everywhere. Amen and Amen.

And we deceive ourselves using God’s Word to justify our choices.

If we look closer at the text, we can see a better view of the situation being addressed. Jesus is speaking to his disciples—this is not a “crowd teaching moment.” He warns about giving in to temptation and leading others astray. He tells a parable about the lost sheep, and of the shepherd who goes out and finds the sheep, restores him and brings him

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home. Verses 15-20 move into what it means—this process of restoring the one who sins. Verse 20 is a confirmation of the prayer of those who are disciplining and bringing those who have sinned back into the body (the Church, *ekklesia*, Matt. 16:18). These verses are tightly held together with an underlying theme of prayer: Prayers that “carry God’s power and align with his will.” He is the one who is working—we are to be led by his Spirit.

The context relates this promise to church discipline and our prayers of intercession on behalf of other believers reinforcing that this process must always be redemptive, never punitive. We have all seen poor examples of this—and it is heartbreaking. We must never—*ever*—forget how important it is that there be a path of restoration into the family.

This verse is an encouragement to church leaders during tough times of loving confrontation to say that God would be present with the two or three witnesses as they are intentional in correcting and restoring the fallen brother or sister. It is good and natural to struggle with this topic and the context itself; and yet, in the wrestling we need to ask ourselves what it might look like if God was wholly invited into the midst of leaders and friends as they redeem this one they all love?

“Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (19-20).

Further backup:

- Matthew 18
- Galatians 6:10:10
- John 14:13-14; 15:7,16; 16:23

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Read Matthew 18 and jot down a few notes on the progression of the chapter.

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- What new insights do you see?

- Pray for a “lost lamb” (family member or friend) who has wandered away from the Good Shepherd.

PART 3: JEREMIAH 29:11 IS NOT ABOUT YOUR OWN PLANS



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BEHIND THE SCENES

Read what Scripture says in Jeremiah 29.

BEYOND THE SURFACE

In part one and part two, we learned the Bible is so much more than a collection of quotes and great one-liners. The Bible shows us the heart of God. When the Bible speaks, God is speaking. For this reason, we approach the Bible with care and intentionality and seek to see it in its original context. It is wise to look past the translated English words to see history, culture, word studies, archeology; learn about the author and the audience; and finally, what the spoken words and concepts meant to the hearer on the day they were spoken. This illuminates the Scriptures in a more trustworthy way, allowing us to better understand how the narrative speaks to us today.

This is foundational: It's not all about us. Our culture. Our experience. Our opinions.

And to some extent, this is a hard "work around" for you and me, for we experience life through our eyes and skin, feeling and thinking and acting as we make choices for our lives.

Consider some of our common misconceptions:

- Nowhere in the New Testament do we find that Jesus spoke the word "grace."
- The word "discipleship" never actually appears in the Bible. It was a word formulated for translation based on a Latin mistranslation of "*mathetes*," which is a military word used to describe "students."
- The concept of "dressing up" for church is never shown as having importance.
- The apple is not the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in Genesis.
- There is no record of a vote being taken in the early church. They made their larger decisions casting lots rather than conducting church business councils.

For this lesson we will refocus on the context of a verse which perhaps

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you've claimed as your own: *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"* (Jer. 29:11).

The entire book of Jeremiah is the promise of God that the Messiah, Jesus, will come. This is not always obvious to the reader when working through the book a chapter at a time. Jeremiah, the author (inspired and called by God), is a doom-and-gloom sort of guy with a very tough job. He is a prophet whose "brief of appointment" required him to tell an awful truth and to lament over the people's sinfulness and then remind them that they will not remain captives forever. God is faithful and will keep his promises.

And what a message Jeremiah delivered! The captives are told that they will be freed from their oppression...not now, mind you, but 70 years from now; if they seek him and repent. Jeremiah gives them a most unthinkable task. Verse 7 of this same chapter instructs the Hebrews to pray for the welfare of Babylon so that there will be grace given to them because their captors are blessed.

What?

Seventy years.

This is what the Lord says: *"When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place."* (Jer. 29:10).

"For I know the plans I have for you" (Jer. 29:11a).

Oh...It makes more sense now.

Think of all those who will die before 70 years passes. Their children and grandchildren will see the promise fulfilled. And there will be lessons along the way. Oppression. There will be struggle and yet there will be opportunities to understand what it is to follow God in times of great sorrow. Verse 12 stands out: *"Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you."*

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But God says *"I know the plans"* because they are *his* plans. God is not Santa Claus and it is not about our plans. We have a bad habit of projecting ourselves onto God. We are not central to the story. God is. And this is so important for us today—we do not want to miss what God is doing!

Let's look at the big picture. There is a caution being taught as learned from the history of the Hebrews in captivity. These are the words of God to his people—his words—and he is central to the story. Today, your life might not look like the plan that you dreamt of. You might be healthy or sick; rich or poor; full of joy or overwhelmed. **But the promised plan is coming.**

God tells those who seek, *"I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile"* (Jer. 29:14). I'm holding onto that promise today.

Further backup

- *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33).
- *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son* (John 3:16-18). This is God's ultimate plan for us.

BETWEEN THE LINES

- What does waiting look like for you today? What is your "70 years?"

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- What captivity have you known or are you facing?

- Maybe you desire freedom and to be carried by God. What would freedom look like to you?

- What prayer might you pray to “bless” those who oppress you so that God will be seen in your witness?

- How are you given opportunities to call on him, seek him and find him?

PART 4: PSALM 46:10 IS NOT ONLY ABOUT BEING STILL



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BEHIND THE SCENES

Read what Scripture says in Psalm 46.

BEYOND THE SURFACE

The purpose of this series of studies has been to look deeper to see how important context and faithful interpretation of God's Word is. We have had some fun with "facts" that actually appear nowhere in Scripture, and learned a few skills along the way:

1. We are aware that culture and personal experience can skew meaning and application of Scripture.
2. Because we so often hear quotes and verses attributed to the Bible, we can get a partial picture—at best—if we do not look deeper. Be inquisitive. Ask questions of the text.
3. Know that context is everything. Find out about the author and dig into the theme and message of the book. What did it mean to the hearer, and how do all of these affect our understanding of the individual Scriptures' message to us today?
4. When choosing only a snippet or portion of the whole narrative, the intended meaning can be distorted or convey the wrong message altogether.

Entire dogmas have become part of the church based on tradition rather than Scripture. Did you know that:

- There is no mention of Mary remaining a virgin after Jesus' birth?
- There are no suggestions in Scripture indicating that crosses should be hung on the walls of churches, mounted on roofs or appear in church buildings? This is tradition that developed within church history over the centuries.
- Jesus never even hinted about an "order of worship" to be followed. He focused mostly on outdoor ministry and informal teaching in the homes of those who invited him in.
- The idea of praying with hands folded is not found in the Bible.
- Pews, pulpits and altars are tools of the modern church, each carrying theological meaning.

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- The idea that church music should be reflective, subdued or played on an organ happen post-Revelation. The Psalmists worshiped with loud clashing cymbals, raising their voices, shouting and adding drums and trumpets.
- Jesus' command to baptize does not mention water but appears to be a Spirit-baptism (see Mark 1:8).

I hope that your belief systems are not shaken nor your sensibilities too scarred, but rather that you are encouraged to study and have a loving debate with friends over your own church traditions. Are we keeping our eyes on Jesus?

In part four, we are looking at the ways in which we take small portions of verses to add to our own “theological mind vaults.” Honestly, the biggest travesty committed against this verse is that only a piece of it is quoted. *“Be still and know that I am God”* (Ps. 46:10a). Period.

It is so succinct and quotable. It fits easily on our coffee mugs, screen-savers and wall hangings. Painters and photographers superimpose this verse over majestic backgrounds, and craftsmen carve these words into their art.

Perhaps the greatest justice we can provide in response is to actually quote the verse in its entirety. Because there is more. He says, *“Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth”* (Ps. 46:10).

Is there not a peace that comes—something deeper that gives us strength—to “be still”? There is trust and honor that is laid at his feet as we know that God is in control. We are his loved children, and our Father is to *“be exalted above all nations”* across the earth. Nothing in the world can stop God from accomplishing his will!

But it's not that easy, is it? Our minds race though our bodies crave rest. We cannot let go, because we do not allow ourselves to fully trust. Overwhelming stress has become our unwelcome companion and we run at a pace we cannot maintain. “We're fine. Fine. Really.” “Everything's OK. How about you?” Each phrase said without depth or authenticity.

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When Jesus calms the sea (Matt. 8:18-22) we are captured by his sovereignty over creation. That very word, “calms,” literally means “all conflict ceasing.” When we experience hard circumstances—impossible passages in our lives—it does not mean God is disciplining us or is angry or has turned his back on us. Our God is not powerless, which sometimes makes our hard situations more difficult to understand.

“Sometimes he calms the storm, and other times he calms his child,” said a friend, Major Rob Reardon.

Be still; God is close. He speaks to us in the storms. He hears our voice and we are never alone. Today is not an extension of every day in our future. One day the storm will be over and that will be a day of miracles.

The day when we can understand fully the truth of Psalms 46:10: *He says, “Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.”* We can rest. We can be still, knowing that nothing can stop God from accomplishing his will.

Further backup:

- Matthew 8:18-22
- *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).*

BETWEEN THE LINES

- Why do you think it is so hard to be “still”?

- In what areas do you need to trust more fully that God is in control?

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- Joni Erickson Tada is a witness for Christ living with quadriplegia, who says, “I will walk. I will dance with Jesus one day.” In light of Psalms 46:10, how is it possible for trust and hope to move us forward even when we do not see the answer or resolution?

- What is one thing you have learned in this series?
