

# A text without its context

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We have all heard the quote, 'God helps those who help themselves.' Some of us facetiously add the reference, Hezekiah 4:13, because anyone who thinks the quote is from the Bible will probably also not know that there is no book of Hezekiah in the Old Testament. But my theme for this article is not the spurious use of the Bible to authenticate a folk saying, but the misquoting of what is actually in the scriptures.

Many misquotes result from poor translations or a lack of understanding of the biblical languages. One example is the often quoted Psalm 121:1-2. The problem started with the King James Version translation, 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth'. This could give the impression that our help comes from the hills, or the god of the hills. However, this is not the intent of these verses. In Old Testament times the pagan priests erected shrines and altars on top of hill, and other high places, and the devotees worshipped their false gods there. The Living Bible captures the real intended idea when it translates the text as; 'Shall I look to the mountain gods for help? No! My help is from Jehovah who made the mountains! And the heavens too!'

The major cause of misquotes is not poor translation but lack of context. A popular expression is, 'a text without a context is a pretext', but I have also heard that 'a text outside of its context is just a con' – I like that. Let me give you a few examples.

Matthew 18:20 records Jesus as saying that "where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them". I have heard this quoted dozens of times to make the point that when two or three believers come together a nuclear church body is formed and Jesus is therefore present among them. Does this then mean that when I am by myself Jesus is not with me? We wouldn't have to ask such a question if we understood the verse in question within its given context. Jesus was dealing with the matter of church discipline and verse 20 is the end of a passage that starts at verse 15. The essence of what He is saying is that when the church rules on a case of recalcitrance then He will stand with them and support the decision. By the way, notice the other widely misquoted phrase embedded in this passage. Matt 18:18 has, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven". This has nothing to do with spiritual warfare or binding demonic powers, or anything of that nature. In Jewish society the synagogue elders had the power to rule concerning matters of religious discipline and doctrine. When they prohibited something or censured someone it was referred to as 'binding' and when they allowed something or vindicated someone it was called 'loosing'.

Another example of a text out of its context is the common church practice on insisting that members confess their sins before participating in Holy Communion, and that anyone who does not is excluded from the sacrament. This practice comes from taking 1 Corinthians 11:27-28 out of context; 'Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup'. The passage actually starts at verse 17 and ends

at verse 34. Paul is appalled at how the Corinthian Christians were sharing around the Lord's Table. The rich people were hogging all the best food and wine at one end of the table while the poor Christians were huddled at the other end with the scraps. Communion in those days was conducted as part of a full meal. Paul was in effect saying; 'don't you realise what the bread and wine of communion signify? They signify the church that Christ Jesus gave His life for! How dare you discriminate against members of His blood-bought church!' This is why verse 29 reads, 'For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself'. The issue is discrimination and selfish indulgence, not ritualised self-examination, or the sanctity of the actual physical elements of communion itself.

I could cite many more but I think the point is clear enough – context, context, context. Outside of the biblical context a text is most likely to become a pretext for practicing error, and sometimes it does 'con' the unwary into wrong belief.