

10 Twisted SCRIPTURES



*Passages That Can
Confuse and Enslave You*

by Greg Albrecht

Ten Twisted Scriptures

Did you know the Bible says that Jesus wants you to commit suicide right now?

1. Judas hanged himself (Matthew 27:5).
2. “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).
3. “That thou doest, do quickly” (John 13:27).

Yes, it’s an old joke and a bad one at that. But it’s an excellent illustration of the dangers of proof-texting—that is, “proving” one’s pet doctrine by quoting one or more Bible passages, usually out of context. “A text, out of context, is a pretext.” This saying is familiar to most theology students, or any serious student of literature, for that matter. In the same way that the verses cited above have nothing to do with one another, dishonest or careless Bible teachers can choose and assemble passages to “prove” nearly anything.

In *Yale Lectures on Preaching and Other Writings*, published in 1888, Nathaniel J. Burton offers this timeless advice to those who teach and preach:

“What is slander? Well, one form of it is reporting that a man has said something that he did not say. And why is not the Bible slandered when some inaccurate and unexigetical fumbler spends hours every week in public discourses on what the Bible says?”

“If we intentionally misrepresent meanings, we are liars, plain as day. But if we misrepresent meanings through carelessness, through laziness, it shows that we have in us the making of a liar. We are willing to make statement after statement that we have never taken the trouble to verify.”

How can you protect yourself from spiritual abuse, incorrect doctrine or simply confusion? Reading the passage in question in *context* is a critically important key to avoiding error.

Let’s take a closer look at ten Bible proof-texts cited so often these days that many people have forgotten what the passages really mean.

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www.ptm.org

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Prooftext 1

Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine? Them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little (Isaiah 28:9-10, KJV).

Most of us have heard this passage interpreted along these lines: “God’s Word brings us into maturity a little at a time, like a baby growing up and eating solid food. He teaches a little at a time, line upon line, precept upon precept.”

God does teach us point by point, that’s true. But is that what this passage is saying? Let’s look at a different translation—in context:

And these also stagger from wine and reel from beer: Priests and prophets stagger from beer and are befuddled with wine; they reel from beer, they stagger when seeing visions, they stumble when rendering decisions. All the tables are covered with vomit and there is not a spot without filth. Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast? For it is: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there.

Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people, to whom he said, ‘This is the resting place, let the weary rest’; and, ‘This is the place of repose’—but they would not listen. So then, the word of the Lord to them will become: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there—so that they will go and fall backward, be injured and snared and captured (Isaiah 28:7-13, NIV).

What’s this “do and do”? Why is this so different from the KJV? This was a tough passage for the KJV translators to handle; it should be understood idiomatically, and their knowledge of some of the finer points of Hebrew was lacking.

“Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule” is the Hebrew *sav lasav sav lasav; kav lakav kav lakav*. These are not real words; they are a

simple rhyme of nonsense syllables. What does it mean? Scholars divide into two camps on this:

1. The nonsense syllables were once a nursery rhyme; the equivalent of “Hickory dickory dock.”

2. The nonsense syllables represent the drunken priests mocking Isaiah; the equivalent of “Blah blah blah; yadda yadda yadda.”

So what’s this passage really saying? Keep in mind that Isaiah is talking to corrupt, alcoholic priests and warning them that God will not tolerate their apostasy. In fact, Jerusalem will fall someday, thanks to them.

Isaiah is rebuking the priests here, not commending the people. The line “Who is it he is trying to teach?” does not refer to the congregation at large; it refers to the priesthood, who are educated in the Word, not elementary school children. These priests (depending on which scholarly camp you belong to) either:

1. Mock Isaiah, a true prophet of the Lord, or
2. Make a mockery of God’s Word by teaching nonsense to their parishioners.

Either leads to the same result: “Very well,” Isaiah says to the priests, “if you won’t tolerate or provide sound teaching, God will take away your knowledge, line upon line, rule upon rule. His Word will become meaningless babbling to you until you stumble and are captured.”

This passage is not at all about how God teaches his children. It’s about how God disciplines disobedient leaders by taking away their wisdom until they are destroyed. A good warning to remember, and one we can miss if we fail to discern the passage’s real meaning.

Prooftext 2

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10).

We’ve all heard who the thief is in this passage: Satan. Who else would want to kill, steal and destroy? Well, would you believe someone who uses the Bible to mislead others? As usual, it helps to read the entire passage in context.

Jesus healed a blind man on the Sabbath, angering the Pharisees. Jesus rebuked them harshly:

Jesus said, 'For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.' Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, 'What? Are we blind too?'

Jesus said, 'If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.'

'The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice.'

Jesus used this figure of speech, but his audience did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, *'I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'*

'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.'

'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep' (John 9:39-10:15).

Who are the players in this metaphor? Does

Satan appear here at all? With the possible exception of the wolf, no. The thieves, robbers, strangers and hired hands refer to the Pharisees, the religious teachers of the day.

Jesus said he himself was the gate, the path to salvation; the Pharisees, on the other hand, were still teaching salvation by good works. Thanks to their rigid dogmatism, in fact, they were willing to throw the healed man and his whole family out of the synagogue instead of rejoicing with him (John 9:18-34).

Satan undoubtedly bears us all nothing but ill will. But if we teach that this verse refers to him, we miss out on an important warning Jesus gives to ministers of the gospel—to watch over the sheep rather than exploit or abuse them.

Prooftext 3

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:20).

This verse is often used for evangelism: Jesus wants to come into our lives, and he stands outside the door of our hearts, waiting patiently for us to invite him in. But that's not what this verse is about at all. Reading this passage in context reveals a startling fact: The door is not the door of someone's heart; it's the door of the church in Laodicea, which had managed to lock Jesus out!

In this section of Revelation (the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor) Jesus rebukes each church for its sin. But then he is quick to praise each church for its good qualities—except the church in Laodicea. That church, the Holy Spirit says, is “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” and will be spit out of God's mouth for being neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm.

This passage is not a call for lost sheep to join the flock—it's a rebuke against one particular flock, which had booted out its own Shepherd.

Does the passage reveal God's patience and eagerness to forgive sin and fellowship with us? Yes, but only incidentally. If we ignore its full con-

text, we miss a critical warning about what God expects from his church and a description of the consequences if we fail to heed that warning.

Prooftext 4

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:25)

Many pastors interpret this verse as an exhortation to be faithful in attending church (not surprisingly, modern-day church practices such as tithing, volunteering to teach Sunday school or ushering are often added). One argument against this interpretation is simply that most of the modern accoutrements of church life today (dedicated buildings, Sunday morning services, vocational ministers and so on) didn't exist when Hebrews was written. While this is true, the passage doesn't mention specifics about how or when to meet, and it's clear that the early church did have frequent corporate worship (Acts 2:46, 5:12; Romans 16:5).

As always, context is key. This verse follows a long explanation of why Moses' Law was only a foreshadowing of the good things to come through Christ (Hebrews 10:1) and an exhortation to discard the Law's empty rituals. Then readers are exhorted to spur one another on toward good works, encouraging one another, practicing love and good deeds and yes, meeting together.

The author of Hebrews then takes a sterner tone, reminding his readers that while they serve a God of love, he brooks no nonsense from his children. Finally, this reminder of punishment for sin is followed by a list of horrific outrages suffered by persecuted believers.

What's the overall message? When Hebrews was written, the church's understanding of God's grace had begun to mature—circumcision had been declared useless (Acts 15:1-19) and finally the Law itself had been proclaimed fulfilled in Christ and no longer necessary. This did not sit well with the priesthood, naturally. Jewish believers were under tremendous pressure to abandon

this newfangled cult of Christianity and return to the Law. As Hebrews 11 shows, no tactic was deemed too cruel in the quest to stamp out the early church.

The command to keep meeting is not an exhortation against those who stay home and watch football rather than go to church. On the contrary, it exhorts persecuted believers to continue fellowship in anticipation of our Savior's return, no matter how much danger one is in. Is it important to stay in the habit of corporate fellowship? Of course. But using this passage to keep the pews filled on Sundays, while ignoring the incredible danger many believers have faced throughout history, only cheapens their courage and sacrifice. This verse should not be used as a club to exhort Christians to regularly attend 21st century corporate worship services.

Prooftext 5

Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it (Proverbs 22:6).

Parents of prodigal children suffer untold pain thanks to the standard interpretation of this verse, which is that proper upbringing insures a child will follow his parents' faith and never waver. But is that really what the verse says?

Since this verse isn't part of a narrative or exposition, the context needed is the entire book of Proverbs. *Bible Knowledge Commentary* defines a proverb as "a literary device whereby a general truth is brought to bear on a specific situation." In plain English, that means there's a big difference between one of God's *proverbs* and one of his *promises*.

Consider these everyday American proverbs: "Haste makes waste" or "An apple a day keeps the doctor away." Are these immutable natural laws—invariable results following certain actions? No, they are descriptions of the way our behavior *tends* to affect our circumstances.

Though the proverbs are generally and usually true, occasional exceptions may be noted. This

may be because of the self-will or deliberate disobedience of an individual who chooses to go his own way. It is *generally* true that children follow their spiritual training, not *invariably* true—in just the same way that haste *generally* makes waste or diet *generally* contributes to overall health.

Parents who misinterpret this proverb often blame themselves if their children rebel. After all, they reason, if proper parenting results in godly kids, rebellious kids must therefore result from inadequate parenting. Poor parenting can certainly lend itself to less-than-ideal children. But is this *always* the case? Consider Adam and Eve. They were created sinless. God made no mistakes in his “parenting”—yet Adam and Eve sinned anyway. Just as God’s love for Adam and Eve did not take away their ability to sin, no parent can hinder a child’s free will.

Parents of prodigals face painful, tragic challenges; we only add to their burden when our careless handling of Scripture provokes them to blame themselves for their children’s sin.

Prooftext 6

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

This passage suffers from two common misinterpretations:

1. Jesus commands us to achieve sinlessness. Some compare this to a 12-step program: An alcoholic, they say, may not be able to live more than five minutes without a drink. So he does without his next drink for just five minutes—one step at a time, for the rest of his life. In the same way, if we can avoid sin for five minutes, we can avoid it forever.

2. Jesus sets God’s perfection as our standard for believers, even though we all realize it’s impossible. Nevertheless we do our best, knowing we’ll achieve perfection only in heaven.

Both interpretations, however, are contrary to the full teaching of Scripture:

1. Not only is none of us sinless, but anyone who claims to be is a liar (1 John 1:8-10). Indeed,

our hearts are geniuses at hiding wickedness, even from ourselves (Jeremiah 17:9). Jesus himself alluded to our ongoing need for forgiveness just a few verses after this verse (Matthew 6:14-15).

2. Jesus himself said that perfection through works—even those works commanded by Moses’ Law—is not possible (Matthew 5:17-47). Why would Jesus then add his own unattainable command to the Law, especially when he proclaimed himself as the Rest from those crushing, futile works? (Matthew 11:28).

If both interpretations are wrong, what does the verse mean? The word “perfect” is the Greek *teleioi*, meaning mature or complete. This is a clue, but even those without a concordance can glean the verse’s meaning by referring to the context.

The word “therefore” in this verse is even more important than the word “perfect.” As the old saying goes, when you see *therefore*, find out where the verse came from and where it’s going to see what therefore is *there for!*

In other words, this verse links two important themes, one in the verses preceding and the other in the verses following:

1. Preceding Matthew 5:48, Jesus says observance of the Law does nothing to purify the heart—one can commit adultery through lust, murder by indulging in hate, and so on.

2. In chapter six, immediately following Matthew 5:48, Jesus describes the approach and attitude of those in whom he dwells (Galatians 2:20); those who have the attitude and mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5): Fasting should be done secretly rather than publicly; alms should be given quietly, even anonymously; prayer should be personal, not by rote, and discreet, not ostentatious.

What’s the difference between the two sets of examples? The first shows how good works do not save us; the second shows how God produces good works in and through us. Matthew 5:48 does not command us to match God’s perfect holiness by the works we can produce; it commands us to yield to Jesus Christ and his righteousness. If we strive for sinless perfection

on the basis of our human performance, we will indeed fail.

Prooftext 7

And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38).

Few issues in the church cause more contention than baptism. What method should be used? Should infants be baptized? Most controversial of all—is baptism necessary for salvation?

Acts 2:38 is often used to “prove” baptism is necessary for salvation. Such an interpretation is contrary to the full teaching of Scripture, which clearly states that repentance alone is necessary for the forgiveness of sins (John 3:16; Romans 4:1-17, 11:6; Galatians 3:8-9; Ephesians 2:8-9).

Like circumcision, the hot issue for the early church, baptism has been misinterpreted by many today as an unnecessary extra step for salvation.

Scripture makes it clear that while we are indeed commanded to be baptized (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:4; 1 Peter 3:21), only repentance through faith is needed for the forgiveness of sins. We would do well to remember this and not place unnecessary burdens on those who yield to God and seek a new life in Christ.

Prooftext 8

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:1-2).

This verse is often used to refer to licentiousness and sexual immorality. Ironically, the real meaning is precisely the opposite. In context, the passage refers to teachers who add such unnecessary requirements to the faith as dietary restrictions or celibacy, hardly the sort of hedonism this passage is often misinterpreted to refer to!

Why Paul’s harsh condemnation, then? To this day, we think of ascetics as those with powerful, robust spiritual lives. After all, it’s not easy to deprive oneself of so many things. Yet Paul makes it clear in earlier writings (Romans 14:2) that the opposite is true: Those who add unnecessary rules and regulations to their faith have weaker, not stronger, consciences.

While Paul urges his readers not to pass judgment on brothers with weaker consciences (Romans 14:1), he has no patience for those who impose arbitrary regulations on others, especially those who insisted circumcision was necessary for salvation, calling them “dogs” and “mutilators of the flesh” (Philippians 3:2), agitators whom he invited to emasculate themselves (Galatians 5:12).

Paul refers not to preachers of circumcision here, but rather to a group of heretics called *Gnostics*, who believed material things (especially our human bodies) were evil. This sort of thinking, despite Paul’s assertion that all things given to us by God are good (1 Timothy 4:3), has plagued the church throughout the ages.

Teaching this passage as a rebuke against license merely reinforces the groundless fear that enjoying God’s good gifts—even physical pleasures like food, drink and sexual relations within marriage—is inherently sinful.

Prooftext 9

Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well (3 John 2). ***But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*** (Matthew 6:33).

Arguably, the modern health/wealth movement has done more prooftexting than any other segment of the church. These two passages, among many others, are used from many a Word-Faith pulpit to “prove” that God’s will for us is perfect health and unbridled wealth. And as with those who mistake Proverbs 22:6 as a promise (see Prooftext 5), illness, poverty and other tem-

poral problems are seen as evidence that one's faith is inadequate.

Space limitations do not permit a full treatment of prosperity doctrine or the problems therein. Suffice to say that, as always, context is king: Passages quoted as proof by health/wealth teachers either mean something else entirely in context, or reveal their proper meaning only in the full light of Scripture.

3 John 2, for instance, is often taught to mean that our physical condition parallels our spiritual condition: Those in good spiritual condition enjoy excellent health as well, whereas illness is a sure sign that something is wrong spiritually. Therefore, the health/wealth teachers say, John is simply stating that Gaius (to whom this epistle is addressed) is as healthy physically as he is spiritually.

Yet this verse is a *prayer*, not a statement of fact. If Gaius' health automatically matched his spiritual condition, wouldn't John instead say "I rejoice that you enjoy good health even as your soul is getting along well"? John is merely asking God to bless Gaius for his faithfulness, which the next few verses make clear.

Similarly, Matthew 6:33 is often taught to mean that if we simply keep our priorities straight, we can have our cake and eat it too—God will free us from worry *and* we'll enjoy temporal riches as well.

Not so fast, though. The phrase *all these things* practically demands that we search for the verse's context, in other words, all *what* things? The previous two verses make it clear that Jesus is referring to the very base necessities of life—food, clothing and shelter. Jesus draws no distinction between owning a multi-million-dollar mansion or sleeping on a cot in an inner-city rescue mission, between a gourmet feast and a meal of bread and water, between designer clothes and thrift-store castoffs.

If God himself clothes, feeds and shelters us, should we not be thankful and content without quibbling or desiring more? (Luke 10:8; Philippians 4:11-12; 1 Tim 6:6-8; Hebrews 13:5).

If we read them carefully and in context,

these verses can teach us to enjoy deep gratitude and contentment, no matter what our circumstances. Misusing them as prooftexts for health/wealth doctrine opens the door to discontent, envy and resentment—not to mention needless guilt and condemnation as we look for spiritual problems that may not exist at all.

Prooftext 10

“Have faith in God,” Jesus answered. “I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours” (Mark 11:22-24). ***By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible*** (Hebrews 11:3).

In *Christianity in Crisis*, Hank Hanegraaff details the sometimes bizarre teaching of Word-Faith teachers who proclaim that God himself needs faith to do his works. Faith, for them, is a substance or commodity we can learn to tap into and exploit in the same way God does. Hanegraaff dryly notes that such teaching encourages us to have faith not in God, but faith in faith.

Some teachers insist that Mark 11:22, for instance, should be translated not “Have faith in God,” but “Have the faith of God” and that Hebrews 11:3 should be understood to refer to the faith God used to create the universe, not our understanding of how he created the universe. But the Greek simply does not support these readings. Even a careful, contextual reading in a good translation reveals the folly of such prooftexting:

1. Mark 11:22-24 teaches us to have faith that God is the one moving the mountain, not the believer, as the phrase *it shall be done for him* makes clear. There is no hint that our own faith can cause such an event, as if faith were a power to be harnessed like electricity (or magic!).

2. Similarly, reading Hebrews 11:3 in context belies the misinterpretation of Word-Faith theology. The entire chapter is about how believers obeyed God through faith—Abel, who offered a better sacrifice (11:4); Enoch, who pleased God and was taken from this life (11:5—note that he did not remove himself!); Noah, who built an ark at God’s command (11:7); Abraham, who left his home when God called him (11:8).

All these examples in Hebrews 11 consist of believers who obeyed God and for whom God did wondrous things. There is no hint of these believers accomplishing wondrous things in their own faith, or of God exercising faith himself.

In its most blatant form, Word-Faith theology teaches that we can become “little gods,” enjoying almost the same power, through faith, that God does himself. Scripture makes it clear that God loves us and is eager to act on our behalf. Misusing passages like these to teach that we ourselves can wield such power is an egregious error. (See “Faith in Faith,” *Plain Truth*, January/February 1997).

Word-Faith teaching actually means that we don’t really need God. After all, if our own faith is what moves the mountain, why call on God at all? This unhealthy arrogance and independence is a dangerous result of the prooftexts the Word-Faith movement uses to support its theology.

This booklet is not intended to frighten the reader or provoke suspicion of pastors and preachers. Rather, it is intended to provoke the reader to be like the Bereans, who listened eagerly to everything Paul said—but then immediately examined Scripture to see if what Paul said was true (Acts 17:11). Careless or dishonest teachers find it much more difficult to lead astray those who make a habit of weighing what they hear against Scripture (Mark 13:22-23; Romans 16:17-18; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 2:4; 1 John 2:26). Believers well-versed in Scripture will, as Jesus said, find solid rock underfoot rather than shifting sand (Matthew 7:24-25), both in the storms of life and in the storm of messages within the church clamoring for our attention.