

Misapplied Quotes from the Bible

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The other day, someone gave me a note with Nahum 1:7 printed at the top: "The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him." For some reason, they neglected to include the next line, which continues the thought from verse 7: "But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of Nineveh." Okay, so maybe the fuller version doesn't deliver quite the same Hallmark moment. And maybe that's the problem with how many Christians use the Bible.

Christians read (and quote) Scripture in tiny, artificial fragments all the time. And by doing so, do we alter the meaning without even realizing it? Digital Bible apps make it easier than ever to Twitterize holy writ. But we've been doing it for ages. Here are some of the most commonly misused Bible verses.

**"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you ...'"
(Jeremiah 29:11, New International Version)**

Jeremiah 29:11 reads like a Christian motivational poster. (Wait. It IS a Christian motivational poster.) No wonder it was Bible Gateway's second-most shared verse of 2013. Woke up on the wrong side of the bed? Don't worry. God has a plan for your day. Facing a rough patch at work? Take a breath. Your future is bright. Money's a bit tight? Relax. God's going to prosper you. Except the words in Jeremiah 29:11 have nothing to do with bad hair days, corporate ladders, or financial success. In 597 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah. He rounded up 10,000 leading citizens of Jerusalem and dumped them in Babylon, 500 miles from home. They lost everything. They didn't know what to do next. From Jerusalem, Jeremiah wrote to the exiles — and told them to get on with their lives: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters." In other words: you're going to be there a while. Yet God promised this wasn't the end for them. In 70 years, the exiles would return home. *This* was the "hope and ... future" mentioned in Jeremiah 29:11. Incidentally, that hope and future was something most of the original exiles wouldn't live to see for themselves. (Seventy years was a long time then, too.) The future described in this passage would be for their children and grandchildren. In other words, Jeremiah 29:11 doesn't guarantee your personal fulfillment.

"We know that all things work together for good to those who love God ... " (Romans 8:28, New King James Version)

Can we agree right now to ban this verse from greeting cards? Romans 8:28 doesn't mean that losing your job or getting cancer is somehow for your own good. In fact, a better translation is probably, "In all things, God works for the good of those who love him." In other words, whatever your circumstances, good or bad, God is still fighting for you. In Romans, Paul claims that Jesus came to rescue both Jews and Gentiles from death, creating a new human family. For Paul, nothing can thwart God's purpose. "Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to

decay," and so will we. The happy ending promised in Romans 8:28 is not just any good outcome, like finding a new job or selling your house for more than the asking price. It's the ultimate happy ending: the renewal of all things. To quote N.T. Wright, "The world is still groaning, and we with it; but God is with us in the groaning, and will bring it out for good." That's what Romans 8:28 is about.

"Ask and it will be given to you ..." (Luke 11:9, New International Version)

It's tempting (and lucrative, for some preachers) to treat this nugget of Scripture as an ironclad promise. Whatever you ask for — promotion, wealth, the spouse of your dreams — God will give it to you. Unless, of course, Luke 11:9 is part of a larger narrative in which Jesus has already told us what to ask for. After a brief episode in which he defends Mary over her sister Martha for choosing what matters most — being a disciple, a citizen of his kingdom — Jesus' followers ask him how to pray. Jesus tells them to ask for things like daily bread, the advent of his kingdom, forgiveness for sin. Only then does he say, "Ask and it will be given to you." It's not, "Ask for anything you want." It's more like, "Ask for my kingdom, and you will have it."

"I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13, New Revised Standard Version)

What happens when we treat the Bible as a random collection of freestanding verses? Well, for one thing, as Tyndale House Publishers editor Keith Williams told Christianity Today, "Philippians 4:13 is going to refer to an athletic performance rather than perseverance through need." For some, "I can do all things" means scoring touchdowns and clearing the bases. But that's not exactly what Paul had in mind. Paul was sharing that he'd learned to be content no matter what his circumstances — rich or poor, hungry or well fed, in prison or out. What Paul was saying is not so much "I can achieve anything," but "I can *endure* anything" — which, in his case, included prison.

"You will always have the poor among you ..." (Matthew 26:11, New Living Translation)

It may not be one of the most popular Bible verses, but this is one of the more frequently misunderstood. As a kid growing up in church, I sometimes heard this text used put down other people's efforts to fight poverty. *There's always going to be poor people. Jesus said as much. So why fight it?* Except the context of this verse suggests a rather different picture. Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 15, which commanded Israel to cancel everyone's debts every seven years. "There need be no poor people among you," the writer insisted, "if only you fully obey." A few lines later, he added, "There will always be poor people in the land." This was a *concession* to reality, not an excuse for apathy. In fact, it was all the more reason to be openhanded with the poor. Jesus alludes to Deuteronomy 15 when he explains why it was okay for a woman to anoint him with expensive perfume shortly before his death, rather than sell the perfume and give the money to the poor. Mark's gospel offers an extended version of Jesus' line: "The poor you will always have with you, *and you can help them any time you want.*" Maybe we'd be better off focusing on the latter part of Jesus' statement.

What do all these misused Bible verses have in common? Well, each is short enough to fit into a single tweet, for one thing. But the Twitterized Bible often leads us down the wrong path because it reinforces an artificial structure on the text. But there's an even more damaging effect. If I'm free to ignore the larger context, then it becomes easier to read the Bible like a narcissist. Suddenly, Jeremiah 29:11 is all about me, not some long dead exiles in Babylon. Philippians 4:13 is about my personal achievements, not the hope that sustained Paul in a dank prison cell. The thing is, the Bible is not all about me. It wasn't even written to me. And ironically, if I'm going to get whatever it has for me, I need to start reading it with that in mind.