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How Can We Apply the Bible to Our Lives if We're Not Supposed to Read Our Circumstances into It?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to apply the Bible to our lives if we're supposed to read it in context and not insert our circumstances into it and how to respond to someone who says the Great Commission was given to the apostles and not to the church writ large (similar to how Jeremiah 29:11 was given to the exiles).

* If we're supposed to read the Bible in context and not insert our lives or circumstances into it, how do we then apply the ancient Word to our current lives?

* How would you respond to someone who said that the Great Commission was given to the apostles and not to the church writ large (similar to how Jeremiah 29:11 was given to the exiles)?

Transcript

Hello, you are listening to Stand to Reason's hashtag-STRask podcast. I'm Amy Hall, and I'm here with Greg Cokel, and we are here to answer your questions. We are this morning.

Good morning, Amy. Good morning, Greg. By the way, are you a morning person? Would you say? Are you stranded in the morning? You know what? I never was, but I feel like the older I get, the more of a morning person I am.

Okay, well, I'm not, and I had a revelation on Sunday. All worship leaders are morning people. This is why they always start with John Philip Sousa music, you know? Is that his name? Yeah.

Yeah. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Everybody up and down.

I say, oh, please, you know. Can't you ease into it? They're all morning persons. So anyway, I stay seated during that until I kind of wake up, and I'm... Anyway, just take that.

Well, Greg, maybe I will revert back to not being a morning person later on in life. Yeah. All right, let's start with a question.

Well, was that kind of a shot at my age? Okay, let's do it. Age in person. All right, I got it.

All right, we got business to take care of here. Okay, here's a question from James. Reformers tell us to read the Bible in context and not take a verse and insert our lives or circumstances into it.

This raises the question, how do we then apply the ancient word to our current lives, i.e., like the verse, I can do all things to Christ who strengthens me. Doesn't apply to us but to Paul? Well, the Reformers are correct in saying that if we want to understand a verse, we have to look at the context, the flow of thought and figure out what the author is communicating. Once we figure out the point the author is making, then we see how do we apply that point to the circumstances of our own life.

Okay? So when Paul is saying, I can do all things Christ who strengthens me, he isn't talking about lifting a house by Jesus' power. I can do that. I can do whatever.

You know, people make all kinds of very odd applications of this verse. In the context, he describes the frame of reference. He is talking about living in good times and in hard times.

And he is saying, I have learned to be able to manage in either case because I can do all things to Christ who strengthens me. Sometimes when an author uses a statement like that, he is using a general statement and giving a specific application. I can do anything.

I can do anything at all. So I certainly can be content in tough circumstances. All right? That might be the way he's taking it.

But it doesn't seem like in that circumstance because it's not obviously true. I can live forever in my physical body. I can never get sick because Christ strengthens me.

Well, this is foolish. We do get it. Paul got sick.

You know, everybody dies. Paul dies. Now, if we get resurrected, that's another issue.

But the point is, it is not literally true that I can do literally everything because of Christ. And this is the way people make these odd applications. It seems that Paul was making a reference to the circumstances that he was describing.

That's the frame of reference. It's just like when we read about John baptizing. Well, maybe this isn't a great example.

But if we say, I went to a party and everyone was there. Well, we don't mean 7 billion people were there. We mean everyone within the frame of reference that we're generally

referring to is all of our friends.

All of our major friends were there. Okay, so it's a generalization applying to a frame of reference. That's what we should be doing here.

And the frame of reference seems to be perseverance and contentment and all kinds of circumstances. And those are the even in the worst of circumstances, Paul is saying, I am capable of being content because Christ tells me to do that. I can do that to Christ.

So I think that's the kind of point he's making and that's completely consistent. First of all, with the kind of the reformers, exhortation regarding interpretations, sticking with the context. And then once we understand, by looking at the flow of thought, what the author's intention was taking into consideration the frame of reference he's speaking, then we say, Oh, he meant this.

Oh, that applies to my life in this particular way. Now I'm going through a really hard time. I'm broke.

Or I mean, I'm not making as much money as I want to make. Or my relationships aren't good. Or I'm not satisfied in the job that I'm at.

blah, blah, blah. Okay, what Paul is saying is, in these circumstances, I can learn to be content because Christ is going to help me. All of these circumstances, none of them are too much for Christ in me.

All right, so now there's a personal application to a principle that's being taught and we're careful to understand precisely what the author intends to mean by the principle with its restraints because we looked at the flow of thought and we've taken into consideration the frame of reference. So we look at the circumstances and the flow of thought and all of these things in terms of the interpretation. So the interpretation is dependent on the meaning of the author, the circumstances they author.

And then we take that interpretation and apply it to other circumstances that are appropriate to the way he meant to give the first. Exactly. I'll give you another example.

And this is, some people may not agree with this, but in the upper room discourse, Jesus tells disciples that he's going to send the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit will lead them unto all truth. Now many Christians take that to mean that all Christians who have the Holy Spirit are going to be led to all truth. And so they cite it.

Well, the Holy Spirit is going to teach me all truth. Well, if that's what Jesus meant, then he failed or the Holy Spirit has failed because Christians who have the Holy Spirit have different points of view about what the truth is. Jesus wasn't speaking to the apostles in that circumstance as Christians, but as apostles.

You are the ones that I will lead to all truth. So when we see that that's the point he's making, he's authenticating the authority of the words that they would speak and write as canon scripture or teaching in the future. And there must be meaning some different things in an apparent contradiction.

This is called the unity, the analogy of faith that we are going to interpret the unclear in light of the clear as the way that works. But it's based on our conviction that these inspired apostles are not going to contradict each other. So the truth that's being communicated there is that Jesus is encouraging or affirming or informing the disciples that all the things that he's taught them before the Holy Spirit will help bring to remembrance to them.

He says that in another verse there in the upper room discourse and then they will be guided to all truth. Okay, that's not for us. That doesn't apply to Christians in the way it applies the apostles, but what is the application for the Christians? The application is we can trust the apostles writings.

So there is something for us to take from that passage, but it isn't the direct teaching is with regards to those individual people. And in some cases, it's really clear that he's talking about them and not us. And other times it's clear that he's talking about us.

When he says to the disciples in the same discourse, I go and I will send you the spirit. Well, that's for everybody. We know that from a number of different places.

And I will come back for you because in my father's house, as many mansions, blah, blah, blah. You know, I'll prepare a praise for you. Well, obviously, this is talking about the second coming when he gathers up the apostles and everybody, you know, raises them and takes them to their final abode.

And so there are things in that passage that are for everybody. And there are some things that are specifically directed to those individuals. When he tells, for example, Judas to go and do what you have to do, that isn't an instruction to all Christians to do what we have to do.

That's Judas in that circumstance. And it's not always easy to parse out which is which, but in this circumstance, as I pointed out, he couldn't be referring to everything. And everybody will be led by the spirit into all truth because it's clear that that's not the case.

I hope what people will take away from this is never read a Bible verse. You can't just go and read one verse and be able to apply it to your life well. The better you know the Bible, the better you will be at interpreting and applying, especially even just within a book, the more you know a book in its whole, the better you will be at applying a part of that to your life.

So we need to be working on seeing a book as a whole, the Bible as a whole, the story as

a whole, who God is, all of these things play into how we understand what's being said. Just like you wouldn't pick up another book, some other book that told a story of something, you know, Lord of the Rings or something. And expect to understand what it's saying if you just read a tiny little part towards the end of the book.

I'm glad you mentioned that because sometimes people might think after you've said what you said, oh my gosh, I got to do all this study. This is so hard. How am I ever getting to the right? What Amy just described is the way we read everything.

We don't read one line at a time out of larger pieces. We read the larger piece or at least the relevant portion of the larger piece to understand what the author's getting at. I often use the illustration.

When I talk about this, never read a Bible verse. When we leave the church service and go out into the foyer and there are different groups of people that are talking about stuff. When we hear a statue of conversation that that piques our curiosity, we enter the group and we ask a question.

What is the question we ask? What are you talking about? And this is exactly the same question we should ask every time we go to the text. So we're not encouraging people to do anything exotic here. We're just telling them to, in a certain sense, to read the Bible the regular way.

And you'll actually enjoy it a lot more if you do that. It'll make a lot more sense to you. It'll be a lot more meaningful.

It's worth it. It's worth it. Okay, so on that note, Greg, here's a question from Michael.

How would you respond to someone who said that the Greg Commission was given to the apostles and not to the church writ large, similar to how Jeremiah 29:11 was given to the exiles? The person who made the statement to me believes the activities of the great commission can generally be found in the New Testament epistles, but the actual command is not levied to every individual believer. What do you think? Well, the way the last part of that was worded. It's not to every individual believer.

What it is, is a command to the church. And it is a command to the church at all ages. And you can tell by the language there.

First of all, it's the very last thing Jesus is saying. His concern obviously isn't with whatever. However, many people are there.

Maybe that's just the apostolic band. Maybe it's 120 people. I'm not sure exactly how many are there.

And the gospels seem to indicate that there are more people at that final event. But

nevertheless, are we actually to believe that what Jesus meant is you 100, even if it's 120, you 120 people are now within your lifetime commissioned with making disciples of every single nation in the world. Good luck.

I can do all things who Christ is trying to speak. No, it's just seems, this mystifies me that this is the way somebody would take it. Okay.

And just the range of what's required shows that this is a long term commission for the church. Okay. Does that mean that the invalid sitting in an old people's home has got to be discipling another invalid? No, but discipleship is really an important part passing the baton on to other people.

Paul talks about this in 2 Timothy chapter 2, the things Timothy, which you've heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. So there is the famous four generation discipleship passing of the baton passage that Paul is describing to Timothy, but he isn't just saying this is just a task of Timothy. What he's describing is the larger task of the church of discipleship.

And he is reminding Timothy, you do this by the way in the chapter one, he says, guard the gospel. By the way, Timothy, I'm just talking to you. I don't care about anybody else.

Guard the gospel. You guard the gospel. When you die, it's all over.

No, this is silly. It's, it's, it's, I don't, I don't know what else I can say. It, it, and you mentioned a broader understanding of the New Testament.

When you have a broader understanding of, of New Testament, in this case theology, you can see how many of these things dovetail together. And it becomes clear that Paul is not just, or Jesus is not making a reference just here to those disciples, or Paul is not making a reference just to Timothy in that regard. He is, he is applying a principle for the church to Timothy in particular.

Okay. It's no, has no relationship or any similarity to Jeremiah 29. Because in Jeremiah 29 11 is part of a longer discourse in which the recipients are very clearly identified.

Write a letter to the people who are in Babylon as exiles and let them know that in 70 years, I am going to do something and bring them back to the land and restore them because I remember my promises that I've made to them in the past. That's what it says. That's paraphrase, of course.

But that's precisely what it says. And the promises were in Deuteronomy 20, 28 through 30. So he is, there's a covenant element that's related to the particulars of the people of Israel.

There's no comparison. But if you know Jeremiah, particularly that chapter, and you

know the teaching of Jesus to his disciples and the point of sending them out in all the different ways he's described it in the different apostles in the different gospels, and you see how they responded by going out to the world and discipling and sending those disciples out. Now you see a clear distinction between these two passages.

And if you don't see a clear distinction, it's only because, and this may sound a little severe, it's only because you're looking at one verse in Jeremiah that somebody like me has said isn't for you, and you're looking at one verse in Matthew that somebody like me is saying is for you. All Christians where the Jeremiah is, not for all Christians. And that's the, that's as far as you've taken it.

If you look at the larger context in both cases, especially in the case of the Great Commission, the larger context of the whole flow of kingdom development that's encouraged that Jesus is involved with. I mean, Jesus himself went to Tyre and Sidon. He went to Gentile regions.

He went to Decapolis. He went to the place where all the pigs were. Jesus himself gave examples of reaching out to all these nations.

So when you see those, the larger picture, it's not that hard. I would also say, Greg, I think you touched on this, but you, it's hard to believe he, this was only for them if he's saying, make disciples of all the nations. It seems so much more likely that if he's calling them to go out to all the nations, he's talking to them as the head of the church.

They're the leaders of the church. So he's giving instructions to the church. I don't, I mean, I'm trying to think it's interesting that, you know, his friend says that he agrees that we are called as Christians to do these things, but that this one commandment is only for them.

But that, that doesn't make sense. Now, in the case of Jeremiah, I do think that God does have plans for us for a good. And we can see that in other places, although that verse is for them in particular, and that promises for them.

Well, the good is to qualify though, because the good in Jeremiah is a very different good. I will restore your fortunes. It's the good of the covenant that is promised.

If they continue in the covenant, which they didn't. So the way that, you know, they're not there now. Right.

So the way that Christians take that is usually the way that is that say Romans 8:28 is understood. So they'll say, yeah, you know, God has plans for your good, for your good. And in the sense of Romans 8:28 when they should just use Romans 8. Yeah, but even that is qualified.

The good there is to make it like Christ. It isn't too prosperous financially and bring us

back to the land and restore the fortunes and all that other stuff that's in Jeremiah. So in the case of Jeremiah, yeah, I do think that there are ways that God is working for a good, even though that promise, you know, isn't.

But in this case, we're talking about the leaders of the church. Jesus is giving instructions to the church. I think that's the bottom line.

And he's speaking to them because they're the leaders. I think that's just the bottom line there. This isn't the first time I've heard somebody ask me about this.

So apparently this is something people are kind of trying to figure out. But at least they understand that this is the task of the church, even if they think this particular command is just for for them. But if it's the exact task is the task of the church.

Why wouldn't this command be for the whole church? Well, the point I was making and I didn't develop this more is it's the command for the church, which means it's going to be characteristic of people in the church, so that the church at large can carry this out, just like it's the command to the church to do a bunch of other things. But it doesn't mean that every single person is doing every one of the other things that the church is supposed to be doing. People are specialists, do they do different things.

Now, in the gear of discipleship, though, I think this is a more a broader and general command to reproduce ourselves in other people. And that includes taking the gospel. That's how people become Christian.

And then when Christian are people are Christian, that's not the end of it. Some people say the whole goal that we're here is to get people into heaven. No, it's not discipleship is to present every man completing Christ.

That's the goal. That's what Paul's goal was. It doesn't stop with an individual when they get saved, so to speak.

It's only starting there. And then they're pursuing becoming part of the body and growing in the ways that Paul talks about, say, example of Ephesians 4, not tossed to and fro by everyone in the way of the doctrine. Anyway, so this whole enterprise is much larger and it entails the discipleship of individuals.

And I talk to people all the time. I just had a conversation today with someone frustrated because they're not being discipled, even though they're in Christian work. They're not being helped and discipled, moved on by a stronger mentor in their lives because they have needs of being discipled.

This is the kind of thing that Jesus is talking about. Make disciples. Not just make Christians make disciples.

There's a difference. Well, thank you, James. And thank you, Michael.

If you have a question and you haven't sent it in, why haven't you sent it in? We'd love to hear from you. You can send it on X with the hashtag STRask. Or you can go to our website at STR.org. And all you need to do is go to our hashtag STRask podcast page and you'll find a link there.

You can send us your question and we'd love to hear from you. So, times are a change in here, though. You said X without qualified.

Yeah, I'm accepting it, but I'm still calling them tweets. I don't really know what else to call them. I'm calling Xs.

Send an X rated. I don't know. Well, thank you so much for listening.

This is Amy Holland, Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.