



"The hasty stroke goes oft astray."  
—J.R.R. Tolkien

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## Always Check the Context

For some inexplicable reason, some mainstream Christians—and even some true ones—will read a verse of Scripture and assume that it applies to them personally. Please do not take this wrongly. The Bible certainly applies to true Christians, but sometimes individual verses do not apply to us at all (for instance, instructions for ministers when we are not one) or perhaps they apply only in principle.

A deacon I used to know was fond of saying that *he* could do all things through Christ. He based it on the apostle Paul's words in [Philippians 4:13](#), "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Then he would mention a miracle, such as Peter walking on the water.

It often proves helpful to get a more complete view from another translation. Consider how *The Amplified Bible* has translated and augmented this verse: "I have strength for all things in Christ Who empowers me [I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him Who infuses inner strength into me; I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency]." Clearly, Paul's thought is different from the deacon's on this point. The apostle is declaring that, with Christ in him, he was able to cope with any and all circumstances that life or the Devil could throw at him.

The deacon's error is not with the Scriptures but in his assumption that "all things" is truly universal in scope. His mistake was in ignoring the context leading up to those verses:

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ([Philippians 4:11-12](#))

In the spirit of [Isaiah 28:10](#)—"For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little"—let us look at [II Corinthians 11:23-29](#) because it gives us a glimpse into the perils the apostle Paul faced in his labors for Christ:

Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?

After enduring this incredible array of sore trials, Paul is saying in [Philippians 4:13](#) that his experiences with Christ had made him equal to anything else that [God](#) might require of him. How many could do likewise today? Precious few. Even Paul himself could not have survived these dangers without Christ providing him confidence, strength, healing, and

hope. The apostle does not write this about you or me, but about himself only. However, his example certainly shows us the path to enduring to the end, as well as insight into what God may require of us.

[Isaiah 64:6-7](#) is another passage that people often apply to themselves and everyone else in the room:

But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. and there is no one who calls on Your name, who stirs himself up to take hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us, and have consumed us because of our iniquities.

The truth of the matter is found in the context, which extends into the next book, Jeremiah. The writings of the prophet Jeremiah, who began his ministry many years after Isaiah finished his, follow Isaiah's because of chronology. From Isaiah's time to Jeremiah's, there was no break (with the exception of King [Josiah](#)) in the downward slide of the people of Judah. A significant portion of Jeremiah chronicles the endless and increasingly perverse sins of the nation.

The following book, Lamentations, the sequel to Jeremiah, is a series of dirges, some in acrostic form, written as if it were liturgy for a national funeral. The introduction to Lamentations in the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the [Old Testament](#)) has Jeremiah sitting and weeping over the then-recent destruction of Jerusalem by God because of her citizens' sins, thus he is known in some circles as the Weeping Prophet. The "righteousness"—if it can be called that—found in the nation of Judah was, in God's sight, as filthy rags. This is the context of [Isaiah 64:6-7](#).

That being said, describing a true Christian's righteousness as filthy rags ignores an enormous amount of instruction throughout the Bible that requires God's people to be holy. Notice, for instance, how the apostle Paul describes Christ's view of His church:

Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the

word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. ([Ephesians 5:25-27](#))

If we are not individually holy, we will not "see the Lord," Paul warns in [Hebrews 12:14](#). Of course, our feeble efforts at righteousness are tainted by our human nature, and are thus unacceptable to God. But when we are converted and justified, the righteousness of [Jesus Christ](#) becomes our righteousness by His blood covering our sins and Him dwelling in us through His Spirit ([Isaiah 54:17](#); [Romans 8:10](#); [I Corinthians 1:30](#); [II Corinthians 5:21](#); [Ephesians 4:23-24](#); [Philippians 1:11](#); [3:9](#); Hebrews 8:14; [10:10](#), 19-22).

So [Isaiah 64:6-7](#) should not be taken out of context to apply to converted Christians. The prophet uses the phrase "our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" to describe the horrid depths of [sin](#) committed by the people of his day, when they should have known better. To use this phrase about God's people today is to say Christ's righteousness is filthy, a blasphemous idea.

These examples should give us incentive to be careful in our studies of God's Word. Always check the context.

- Mike Fuhrer

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [Studying the Bible](#)

by John O. Reid

We must rekindle our ardency for Bible study, God's personal instruction to us on the big questions of life. Because of the busy times in which we live, we may feel overwhelmed, forgetting the awesome intent and responsibility of our calling. Bible study provides a personal means of attaining the mind of God, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. This message provides a practical alphabetical, mnemonic guide to systematically and analytically process (including asking questions, outlining and analyzing the

books, chapters, paragraphs, verses, and individual words, understanding their contexts) biblical information we may have otherwise discarded. Alternate methods (themes, topics, principles, proverb indexing, and scripture cards) are also modeled.

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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'The Jewish Testament?'

'Prophecy's Place'

'Putting Out Flawed Study Practices'

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