The Eternal Word: Understood and Applied

11.1.26

The Reunion Church

Dr. Stephen Isaac

Introduction

"How does this verse apply to my life?" is often the wrong question to ask when studying Scripture and looking for Biblical connections that can be understood correctly and then practically applied. In most cases, it's the wrong question because God did not give verses of the Bible as discrete, individual pieces of information that, on their own (isolated and independent from the larger narrative), are meant to be randomly applied piecemeal to our lives.

Instead, there is an overall flow or contextual theme of thought connected to-and therefore critical to the meaning of each part. Staying "contextually connected" to the flow or theme of the broader passage is key to accurately determining how the text's particular details and nuances apply to our individual lives. That "contextual connection" includes not just a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, or even an entire book, but sometimes also involves (as we'll see later) where the writing is positioned in the

contextual flow of history-the flow of the biblical narrative-as God's promises and purposes are worked out through Israel, and later through the church, and then through you and me.

If we miss this contextual connection or flow of thought, we'll likely miss the meaning. If we miss the meaning, we'll miss what God is actually saying in the text, and how it should be understood and applied. If we miss that, well, we've missed everything. Worse, we might be doing ourselves and others harm by passing on as God's lesson something He did not intend or that had nothing to do with Him.

Sometimes this concept is better caught than taught, so for today let's explore a few examples to clarify the point. First, let’s state a premise for this Short Series, The Eternal Word: Understood and Applied

Premise

Our premise is that we must teach a right and righteous discipleship process to equip Christ followers not only to better understand the eternal Word of God in its original intent and correct context, but also to cultivate a right heart and righteous

courage made practical for faithful application to the eternal Word. We seek His purposes for His Word, not our own. There we find the practical path for our transformational journey of faith. A transformation into the image of Christ Jesus the Messiah.

Narrative and Context One: Matthew 8:23-27
Jesus Calms the Storm, Peter Walks on Water

> Matthew 14:22-33 ESV
> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. 25 And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. 26 But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. 27 But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.” 28 And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” 29 He said, “Come.” So Peter

got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. 30 But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” 31 Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” 32 And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. 33 And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Jesus teaches the SOTM, feeds the 5,000, sends the disciple immediately away, and stills the storm. Peter walks (momentarily) on water. We find a record of the tempest in Matt. 8:23-27, Mk. 4:36-41, and Lk. 8:22-25, and of Peter's attempt in Matt. 14:30-33. The sermon take-away: Jesus can "still the storms" in your life. "Keep your eyes on Jesus,” and you won't "sink." Notice the temptation, when teaching from the Gospels (or any narrative, for that matter), to make metaphors of historical events in the text that, as it turns out, were included to make entirely different points.

Certainly, if Jesus can command the forces of nature, He can fully quiet the tempests or storms in our lives. That doesn't mean He will, of course. He might, rather, walk us through them-which is

more often the case in actual practice. (As one of my early Bible College professors, Dr. James Stone, pointed out, Jesus is not the bridge over troubled waters, but He can pull you through the troubled waters if you can withstand the force of the tow? Regardless, Jesus' help in time of trial is not why this account is in the narrative. At best that's a secondary-and therefore less important-application. The writers were making a different point.

Why did the inspired authors include this event in the record? What conclusions did they want us to draw from it?

In this case, there's no mystery since the account itself provides the answer-easy to see if you connected to the contextual flow. Note the authors' virtually identical application at the end of each version of the Gospels :

> ‘They were fearful and amazed, saying to one another, 'Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?’ (Lk. 8:25)

> ‘Those who were in the boat worshiped
> Him, saying, 'You are certainly God's Son!' (Matt. 14:32-33)

When Jesus works these wonders, the authors do not reduce the events to metaphors. They offer no counsel about keeping our eyes on Jesus, who will quell the conflicts in our lives. They include these events not so much to comfort us with Jesus' capabilities (What He can do) as to instruct us on Jesus' identity (Who He is).

This is about Him, not Peter. This is about the Messiah being fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. It is about the person of Christ, not our personal woes.

Clearly, these accounts teach a lesson about trust in the midst of difficulties (each calls out weak faith), but that instruction is grounded in a more central point:

> We are in the care and grace of the very Master and Creator of the Universe. We are safe; we are secured because Jesus is God. Who He is - before what He does.

To rightly understand the eternal Word of God, we do not need to make metaphors out of each and every historical event in the text. Do not make a secondary application the primary one and miss the very point of the critical truth the original writers were making

in the first place. Instead, we first ask, *"What does the writer mean to communicate by including this event in his account?* Next we ask. "*What was his intention, and the purpose for which he is writing?"* Then look to the contextual content or flow for the answer and draw your understanding and practical application from that well.

The Eternal Word: Understood and Applied

11.7.26

Narrative and Context Two: Matthew 8:23-27

Jesus Curses the Fig Tree, Personalizes Actionable Faith

> Matthew 21:17-22 ESV
> “And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there. In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again!” And the fig tree withered at once. When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, “How did the fig tree wither at once?” And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”

So, to reiterate, this passage of Scripture here from Mathew's gospel is known as *"the parable of the barren fig tree."*
Symbolically, it represents Israel’s leadership, and the lack of figs

represents their lack of genuine acts of faith. The cursed tree symbolizes God's judgment on Jerusalem and the leaders of Israel, particularly the religious leaders of the temple. The tree “stood out" and was obvious because it was in season, evidenced by its leaves. Its leaves announced to anyone understanding fruit-bearing trees that it was indeed bearing fruit. But the announcement was false. Having this evidential knowledge about the story of the parable of the barren fig tree helps us understand it is not particularly ***to us*** or ***about us.*** Yet, because it is God's eternal Word, it is most certainly ***for us***. Based on the meaning of the story of the barren fig tree, I have a question for us.

What can we learn about understanding and applying the eternal Word of God to our lives in this passage?

*Are there any actionable lessons **for us** in the story?*
If so, what should we ask ourselves about them?

For example:

What does my life announce about who I am?
What kind of fruit am I bearing?

In the moment, maybe these kinds of questions cause you to feel "called out", cornered, or even uncomfortable with the conversation. Understandable, and yet the intended meaning and purposes of God's eternal Word must be spoken, taught, and lived out in our lives. I'm sure Jesus' disciples felt called out, cornered, and uncomfortable. However, I believe the next part of this story would've given them hope again. In response to Peter's comment that the tree has indeed withered, Jesus said:

> "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."

Let's dig even deeper for a moment into the context and evidence of the passage so we can better understand and apply what is there for us.

It seems quite clear that Jesus made the fact that His curse of the tree became true a lesson on prayer and actionable faith. But to understand His message, we need to consider what the geography of the text reveals.

[Maps: Regional Map of Jerusalem During the Time of Christ]

Three geographical elements played a role in Jesus' response:

(1) The route they traveled.

(2) The mountain that the disciples could move.

(3) The sea they could move it to.

So, let's focus on the geography for a moment. Both Matthew and Mark make it clear that Jesus and His disciples were coming from Bethany and were journeying northwest towards Jerusalem. The distance between Bethany and Jerusalem was 3.2 km [the same distance from here to Sprouts at 83rd Ave and Thunderbird]. Basically, a five minutes' drive with a car, and thirty-five minutes walking.

Allow me to help you with identifying the geography. Initially, there are three mountains in sight while traveling between Bethany and Jerusalem. However, very quickly *Mount Zion* to the north and *The Mount of Olives* to the northeast disappear. The one mountain that remains in full view for the entirety of the journey to Bethany is the man-made mountain on which Herod the Great built his desert fortress called *"The Herodium."* The *Herodium* lay

south of Jesus and His disciples, or behind them as they traveled northwest toward Jerusalem, past the *Dead Sea*, about 9km southeast of Bethany. Various scholars argue the case for each of these three options. Those who interpret the fig tree's withering as foreshadowing the destruction of the temple identify “this mountain” with *Mount Zion*. Those who interpret the withering as an end-time prophecy, linked to Zechariah 14:4, identify “this mountain” as the *Mount of Olives*. *The third option* is that it refers to the mountain on which the *Herodium* was built. Herod the Great, the Roman-backed king who ruled Israel when Jesus was born, built the *Herodium* to promote his wealth and indulge his proclivity to deviance and immorality.

Which of the three mountains would be the most likely? I believe the third option is the most likely. Why? Because the *Herodium* was the most notorious landmark of Jesus’ day and it was in plain sight as Jesus and His disciples traveled back into Jerusalem on that morning as recorded by Matthew's Gospel. The mountain and fortress was built by the same narcissistic and psychopathic King who only thirty-three years earlier had decreed the murder of every first-born male child in order to prevent the prophesied coming Messiah. As Jesus and traveled back to Jerusalem, *the Herodium* was just to the south of them. Remember the massacre

of the innocents – the incident where the king ordered all male children two years and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem to be killed? It was this Herod who built the Herodium. He died when Jesus was still a baby. But more importantly, Herod's mausoleum was part of the *Herodium* palatial fortress . Even secular historical literature supports that Herod the Great was perhaps the most hated and disdained ruling personality in ancient Jewish history. Getting rid of the *Herodium* was something that all Israelites dreamed about.

For most Jews, including the disciples, the Herodium presented very negative emotions. During the reign, they, along with other working-class people in the land, paid ridiculous taxes that funded large building projects like the *Herodium*. They could only watch as the privileged few leisurely swam in its large swimming pool, strolled through its lower palace gardens, and climbed the 200 marble stairs to the upper palace complex.

Politically, for the Jews, the *Herodium* represented the unwanted Roman occupation of the promised land. And religiously, it was an advertisement for pagan, godless corruption.

Maybe this isn't enough proof for you that "this mountain" refers to the mountain the Herodium was built on. As I said a moment ago, the Herodium is the only of the three mountains in view during their journey, and it was the only one with a history of being moved in Jesus' day. I believe this is why Jesus talked about moving the mountain. Herod directed his builders to remove earth from next to the mountain to the area where the *Herodium* was built. He did this to provide material to create an artificial slope, which ran from the circular hall down to the base of the *Herodium*. This slope gave the Herodium an evenness not found in the natural world and created a structure unique to the Hellenistic-Roman world visible for all to see. The Jewish people could hardly tolerate the very sight of it.

From the Jewish perspective, the *Herodium* represented everything wrong in their society. It was not only something that they despised. As I've said earlier, they would've readily aggressively obliterated and removed it from the face of the earth. But what could they do? They were little more than serving class peasants caught up in the overreaching force and oppressive power of the Roman world.

So, Jesus said to them: *“Have faith in God. 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.”*

Geography teaches us that the only inland lake visible from Jesus’ location was the Dead Sea. It was located just a few kilometers east of the Herodium. Because of the Dead Sea’s high chemical content, aquatic life we typically associate with an inland lake is non-existent. This lifeless characteristic of the Dead Sea played a role in a recommendation in traditional rabbinic writings (the Mishnah) for Jews confronted with an unholy object: The rabbis instructed that tools or appliances with pagan figures or insignias on them, or any wood associated with pagan worship, should be cast into the Dead Sea. This is what Jesus said to His disciples. The Jews believed that there was nothing they could do to get rid of the *Herodium* and everything it represented. The *Dead Sea* was the designated Jewish dump for pagan idols and icons. Not so, Jesus said. You can get rid of this monstrous symbol of evil oppression as quickly as I have gotten rid of this barren tree.

"Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Jesus is teaching his disciples about the importance of prayer and trust. *"if you have faith,"* and *"do not doubt."*

Have you ever been in an unpleasant situation where you thought: *"If only I could…"* Faith can move a mountain. Or to put it differently: faith is needed to do something that seems impossible.

Jesus is not suggesting that faith guarantees that we will receive anything we desire. The wonderful promise of Matthew 21:21–22 points to the miraculous power available to the disciples to fulfill their calling to live the Christian life in discipleship that produces fruit.

There is no record of any disciple ever moving a literal, physical mountain. But throughout the history of the Christian church, mountainous difficulties have often been removed when people have prayed in faith. There can be no doubt that it is this to which Jesus is referring. Friends, we worship a God who moves mountains. Through this incident, Matthew and Mark provide as

dramatic an illustration as one could conceive of God, enabling us to have faith in Him for that which seems humanly impossible.

The Eternal Word: Understood and Applied

11.15.26

Narrative and Context Three: Romans 8:28-30

All Good - All the Time

Introduction

We are going to read in a moment that God works in all things for the good of those who love him. We will also learn that along with His promise there is a necessary limitation. The author Paul is not expressing a general, superficial blanket optimism that everything merrily ends up accommodating to everybody's good in the end. No, if the 'good' which is God's objective is our completed salvation, then the benefactors are us, His people, who are described as **those who love Him**. This is not a commonly used phrase for Paul, because his references in the book of Romans to love are more direct towards God's love for us (Romans 5:5, 8; 8:35-39). Nevertheless, he does elsewhere reference our love for God, and this is a common biblical concept, since we all know that the first and great commandment is that we love God with all our being.

We will also learn that those who love God are also described as those who have been *called according to His purpose.* For 'their love for him is a sign and token of his prior love for them', which has found expression in His eternal purpose and His historical call. So here is the key - God has a saving purpose, and is working in accordance with it. Life is not the random mess which it may sometimes appear. Let's read...

> Romans 8:26-28 ESV
>
> "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. 27 And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. 28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose."

One of the most magnificent promises in the Bible is one that's almost universally misunderstood, at least in part. That promise is found in Roman's 8:28, and loosely quoted, here are a couple of

the more popular versions from the passage *"All things work for good"*, or, *"All things work together for my good."*

The fact is, though, all things don't always work out "good." Some things work out very badly, even for Christians. This can appear on the surface to be a case of viewing through a negative lens and incredibly disheartening. Especially when Romans 8:28 is your *life* or *go-to* verse in hard times, yet conditions don't appear to improve.

Here are the first of a few significant teaching points.

> **The problem of Romans 8:28 is not in the promise itself, but in the reading, interpretation, and understanding of the promise**.

To begin to correct this problem let's go back to the passage:

> *"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose"* (Romans 8:28). ESV

Initially let's acknowledge the fact that there are ***confidence phrases*** in this promise as well as a ***promise qualifiers****.* The obvious confidence phrases are "God causes all things," and "to work together for good." It is, however, the **promise qualifier** that readers commonly miss. In Romans 8:28, the *promise qualifier* is: *"to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."*

Here is our next major teaching point for this text.

> **One cannot competently and confidently interpret correctly the great and hopeful promise of, "*God causes all things to work together for good"* without applying the qualifying statement; *"to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."***

In complete, everyday reality, everything doesn't always work out well for everyone. And because of that reality the promise qualifier for Romans 8:28 bears repeating.

> **Only those who genuinely love God and those who are called according to His purpose—can count on the**

blessed assurances of the promise written in Romans 8:28.

The assurance and hope of "all good - all the time" can and will be fulfilled only for... "*those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."*

Even so, a gnawing doubt remains: "But don't good, godly, faithful Christians often find themselves enduring a lifetime of intractable difficulties or suffering for righteousness' sake through nothing of their own doing? Those without understanding and revelation of a bigger truth than their own will always ask: "*Where's the 'good' in that? Whatever happened to 'God doesn't close a door, but He opens up a window?"*

Here's the problem with that limited and short-sighted response. We often take "work together for good" to mean that whatever loss we suffer in life will be repaid with interest later on in life - Romans 8:28. We suffer relationship heartbreak, only to later marry a much more suitable person than the one we lost - Romans 8:28. We lose our job, only to secure a better one next week, next month, next year - Romans 8:28.

And sometimes that happens. Praise God that we hear these testimonies all the time. However, that is not what this verse promises. Even in hardship and suffering, Paul was the beneficiary of an entirely different "good." And, this is the "good" that he had in mind. We find the evidence for that "good" when we follow the flow, or biblical context, through to the next verse:

> "For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30 ESV)

Because of what the all-knowing God has known about us since before the foundations of the earth, He, by His great love for us, determined that you and I would be conformed into the image of His Son Yeshua.

Isn't this kind of good, good enough?

When hard and difficult times come against us, we often claim Romans 8:28 with our predetermined version of what is "good" in

mind, yet God has a different "good" in mind. For the committed Christian, God promises to use every hardship, disappointment, trouble, or affliction to make us more like Christ - we are being conformed into the image of His Son, and not the image of man. Is not the goodness of God better than the goodness of man?

Maybe we lose the woman or man we love and then remain single, like Jesus, for the rest of our life. Or, we planned on the football scholarship and playing at the next level only to see that dream not come true. But instead, we end up in the ministry, praying “not my will but yours be done” - like Jesus. Maybe our stock options fall through, and we end up poor—like Jesus—for the rest of our life. Maybe we are convicted of a crime we did not commit, and we suffer unjustly- like Jesus- for the rest of our life. Does this mean that God is not good? Does this mean that faith in a good God is not real?

God's promise: None of it will be wasted - the good and the bad. But only what we do for Christ will last, and ultimately that is the assurance of Romans 8:28-29.

Colossians 3:23-24 ESV

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”

And that is as "good" as it can get on this remarkable journey of faith on our way to becoming like Jesus. And that, my brothers and sisters, is all good, all the time. Jesus said, "no one is good but the Father", and there is nothing better than that.