

Five Popular Bible Passages We May Be Misinterpreting (Part 2)

Not long after REO was created, while it was still cooling on the window sill, I wrote an article on [Five Popular Bible Passages We May Be Misinterpreting](#). It created quite a bit of response. In the vein of much of modern Hollywood, I have written this sequel years later.

The point of it, I will repeat from last time, is to challenge how we think about the Bible. I want to push against our preconceived interpretations that perhaps we have never thought much about, the popular ones that do not often get challenged.

I give two disclaimers, though: First, I am not saying that I am positive that the alternative interpretations below are correct. Just that, according to some students of Scripture, they may be. And we should think through them in humility and wisdom, aiming to rightly divide the word of truth. Even if it means saying, "I was wrong." Secondly, I am purposely avoiding passages like Philippians 4:13, Jeremiah 29:11 and the "Where two or three are gathered" verse because they are commonly picked on. These, in my experience, are not. Let's look at them.

Exodus 14:14

Moses answered the people, "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Traditional Interpretation: When faced with daunting circumstances, we need to be still and let God fight for us.

Alternative Interpretation: God may want us to move instead of crying out to him.

The next verse is absolutely why I believe this:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on."

I hasten to add that I have heard wise, biblically sound Christian pastors and teachers cite this verse on social media. So maybe I am overthinking it. But at this point, Exodus 14:14 is not a verse I would use to teach people to be still. Psalm 46:10, yes. Instead, I use this pair of verses and their greater context to teach that there is a time to pray but there is also a time to get moving. Prayer is not a substitute for action.

Matthew 27:46

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Traditional Interpretation: God turned his back on Jesus (or abandoned him, or some verb of relational separation) to judge him for the sin of mankind since God cannot look upon sin.

Alternative Interpretation: Jesus, using a rabbinic practice of quoting only the first verse of a Psalm to communicate the entire psalm, is telling the audience that God will save him from this horrific circumstance. As Psalm 22 teaches.

I think "How Deep the Father's Love For Us" has contributed to the understanding of this verse, as it says, "The Father turned his face away." But even without the hymn, I have heard the traditional interpretation over and over in my life. I have always assumed it to be true. Yet read the words of Jeffrey Crabtree in the Randall House Commentary on Matthew:

Was Jesus actually abandoned and calling on God from His sense of that? Or was He primarily saying this for the benefit of His human audience? Some interpreters understand Jesus' question to mean that the Father did in some sense forsake His Son as He hung on the cross as the atonement for the sin of the world (Hendriksen 971; Hagner 33B:844). Others understand Jesus to have been implying, "Read the twenty-second Psalm. It tells you what this crucifixion is about. I may look forsaken (Mt. 27:43) but I am not" (Ps. 22:24). This makes Jesus' quote and question mainly rhetorical...

...It seems probable that Jesus was not forsaken (Ps. 22:24) even though it appeared to those on the ground that He was and even though He Himself felt forsaken (Evans, Matthew 514). He had suffered forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of His ministry and endured extreme loneliness in the Garden the previous night in prayer. In like manner, on the cross at the time of His greatest suffering Jesus again felt isolation, only this time the sense of isolation was the most intense of His entire human experience—because He bore the wrath of God for the sins of the entire world.

The interpreter will want to consider the implications of the position he determines to be Scripture's intent. Can the Father and Son really separate in their beings (Jn. 10:30)? Would such a real

[separation agree with Psalm 22:24?](#)[1. Jeffrey Cabtree, *The Randall House Bible Commentary: Matthew*, 466-67]

I find Mr. Crabtree's explanation nuanced and balanced and it causes me to consider it. Yet I add that I am still struggling through this one. And I have not bought the alternative interpretation completely yet. This is not a major doctrinal issue to me but it's still something worth thinking through and wrestling with. Verses like 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 8:3 give me pause in abandoning the traditional interpretation.

John 3:30

"[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease."

Traditional Interpretation: We must increase Christ with our lives and be humble.

Alternative Interpretation: Christ must increase by the very nature of things no matter what we do or don't do.

The word "must" works one of two ways, illustrated by the two interpretations above. We can say, "If you want to take English classes, you must register." You control that. But we also say, "What goes up, must come down." You don't control that. You cannot do anything to affect it, start it, stop it or alter it. It's something that happens *by the very nature of things*. The latter definition is what I think John means.

There are several reasons I believe this but here are three: First, it fits with how John the Gospel author used the Greek word "must" (δεῖ) earlier in the same chapter when he said, **"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up."** Based on verses like Acts 2:23 and 4:28, we know that the death of Christ was something God determined should happen and that humans could not prevent it or cause it. It is God's—and Jesus's—nature to save, just as

it is gravity's nature to bring objects to the earth.

Secondly, this fits with Jesus in Luke when he said, **"If [my disciples] keep quiet the stones will cry out."** Christ will be worshipped because His nature as God demands it and not because we must do it.

And lastly, the context before John 3:30 leaves the interpretation up in the air, but in the verses after he says, **"The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all."** This speaks to Christ nature as above us, which leads me to believe John is explaining why Christ must increase by the very nature of things more than Christ must increase because we must do it.

All of this matters because it helps me understand how Christ as God is bigger than my worship. He must increase as God in the sense that he must be exalted, praised and magnified. And even if free will beings refuse to do so, there are still billions of created voices doing it around the clock.

John 11:33-35

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept.

Traditional Interpretation: Jesus was saddened by the death of his friend and cried as a result.

Alternative Interpretation: Jesus was angry because of the reaction of the people and was overcome with emotional distress.

I suppose it's possible both are true but at the very least I

think this passage needs to be taught as Jesus was angry as much as sad. "Deeply moved" in the verse above is open to interpretation over a range of stressful emotion but it definitely bends to anger in my opinion. And this can be seen in how some prominent translations render it (NLT, HCSB). The people doubted him (vs. 37) and lack of faith often made Jesus angry (Mark 16:14).

Revelation 3:16

So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

Traditional Interpretation: God wants you to be for him or against him, but not on the fence.

Alternative Interpretation: God wants you to be for him and hates lukewarmness.

This doesn't change the main meaning of the passage, but it is possible that when God refers to hot and cold water he means that both hot and cold have a purpose. Cold water is good to drink and hot water is good for cooking, among other uses for both. So God wants us to be useful. Lukewarm water is good for nothing. It's nasty and worth only spitting out.

Let me conclude by saying that when I did the last article, the discussion in the comment section below was very edifying and I actually adapted my opinion of Proverbs 22:6 as a result. So we strongly encourage feedback and interaction, even respectful disagreement.