

DOES THE BIBLE REALLY SAY THAT?



BY DAVID FOREMAN &
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Into or Out of?

Do I really want to claim *all* the blessings in the Bible? I realize the Bible assures us, “For every one of God’s promises are “Yes” in him; therefore also through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken, to the glory we give to God.” (2 Corinthians 1:20, NET). But obviously I can’t claim the right to be a blessed baby smasher,

the Bible saying a lot of things that the Bible “plainly” doesn’t say.

Here are two ten-dollar words that all students of the Bible should learn:

- *Exegesis* [pronounced ek-si-JEE-sis]
- *Eisegesis* [pronounced ice-si-JEE-sis]

Just because God seems to promise a blessing, like the promise of blessings on baby smashers, does not mean we can “claim” that biblical promise for ourselves willy-nilly. Context matters to faithful interpretation.

Do you want to claim all the blessings of the Bible? I’ve heard pastors telling their congregants to claim this very thing. But I have reservations. And I raise my reservations in order to question common assumptions about what the Bible is and how to interpret it.

Now I like this blessing:

Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble (Psalm 41:1).

But look at this one:

Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! (Psalm 137:9, ESV).

can I? *Houston, we have a problem.*

As I have grown to love and trust the Bible, I’ve come to understand that the Scriptures “plainly” say a lot of things. But, where I see us frequently getting off track is when we fail to read Scriptures in context. If we fail to do so, we can read

Exegesis means “a reading out.” It’s the faithful attempt to interpret the message of Scriptures in context. Eisegesis means “a reading into.” It’s the frequent and unfortunate practice of imposing external assumptions on Scriptures to the neglect of a serious attempt to

search for meaning in context.

Eisegesis has an unfortunate result in the church. I've seen too many dear saints look down on

wants to be the definition of what some insist *poor in spirit* means? I don't! I've been there, and I wanted out. No one in their right mind,

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themselves because they've "claimed" some biblical promise plucked from its context, only to have God "fail to deliver on his 'word.'" Since the fault can't be with God, they conclude that it must be a lack of faith on their part. So how can we address this, maybe even fix this?

Randomly Claiming Promises

I now look at it like this. Just because God seems to promise a blessing, like the promise of blessings on baby smashers, does not mean we can "claim" that biblical promise for ourselves willy-nilly. Context matters to faithful interpretation. And most Christians would quickly agree, I think, that something is just wrong in randomly claiming promises that may mean something vastly different in context, and promises that may not even apply to them.

Look, brothers and sisters. What if it's not that God has failed on his promises or that you lacked faith? What if sound exegesis reveals that he never made those promises to you in the first place?

Jesus blessed a variety of people in what is called The Beatitudes recorded in his Sermon on the Mount. Here's one:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3).

This blessing is widely interpreted as: *I have to be poor in spirit to get the kingdom of heaven.* But who

it seems to me, wants "the dark night of the soul." To make such an assumption means we are doing eisegesis—reading into the Scripture our own false assumption. We are reading into Jesus' words something that's not there.

It takes nothing away from me and you that Jesus blesses those who at that moment (or any moment) may be walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

Context and Content

I believe, as Scripture says, all of God's promises are Yes and Amen. When God really makes you a promise, he will really keep it. But

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just because you make a quick reading (or misreading) of a verse, doesn't mean you can presume a personal promise from God. Sometimes you can, admittedly. Good exegesis bears it out. Here's an example, again from the Sermon on the Mount.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me (Matthew 5:11).

Context and content both promise something straightforward and simple. It doesn't mean that you should go out trying to make people hate you and lie

about you so you can earn the blessing! It means that when your love and loyalty to Jesus results in the deep hurt that comes from people hating you or lying about you, know deep in your heart that you are blessed personally by that same Lord. That's a biblical promise you can bank on when such situations arise.

What the Bible Is and Isn't

We can avoid misusing the Scriptures by the very way we approach them in the first place. Yes, Scripture is good for training, doctrine, etc. But (and I'm sure some fundamentalists will crucify me for this) Scripture is not the "end all" in knowing God. This is not my opinion—Jesus said it.

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think



that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).

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ally. Let him reveal truth to us personally. Scriptures are for our aid and guidance in arriving at Truth, which is, of course, Him (John 8:32, 14:6). To make Scriptures more than that, biblically speaking, is idolatry. The Bible isn't God. It points us to him and leads us to life abundant in a close personal relationship with him.

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Idolatry, of course, is when we worship something other than God. Today, too many Christians treat the Bible as an object of worship, almost as if it's a fourth part of the Holy Trinity.

divine inspiration and divine "dictation." It was, after all, God who completely trusted the imperfect human beings who wrote and collected the documents in our Bible. He created these people, endowed them with intelligence and talent and skill, and employed them through God the Holy Spirit to write those things which lead us to knowledge of God.

This is why I cannot label the Bible, as it is often labeled, as an "owner's manual," a "playbook," a "rulebook" or a "how-to guide." These smack to me of marketing gimmicks. I see the Bible as the inspired story of God's love for his people, and his determination to have a relationship of utter union with them. We are invited by Scripture to abide in him, even as he abides in us (John 15:4).

The "Baby-Smashing" Promise

So what about the "baby-smashing" blessing?

There are a number of Scriptures about it (2 Kings 8:12; Isaiah 13:16; Hosea 13:16; Nahum 3:10). Amazingly, thanks to eisegesis, hardcore

doctrines have been established on less! We've seen great misuses with New Age fads, for example, "prosperity teaching." People who fall for such abuses that distort Scripture judge the faith of others by how nice a car they drive. And if they themselves drive a clunker, they judge themselves as faith-deficient. Let's not let these abuses slide. Of course, the Bible is "good for...doctrine," but this doesn't mean that we can pluck Scripture out and twist it to fit our whims.

"Passing children through the fire" was the Ammonite's practice of pagan child sacrifice to the calf-headed man-god named Molech (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31; 19:2-6), and this practice was prohibited by the Old Testament as idolatrous (not to mention abhorrent). Paralleling this pagan worship barbarism was the gruesome military practice employed by some of Israel's enemies of dashing captured children on rocks, even opening up the wombs of captured pregnant women to accomplish this.

These practices were despised by the biblical writers. Yet in Psalm 137, baby-smashing is given a painful twist. The psalmist bemoans Israel's captivity in Babylon. There is weeping and unimaginable hardship. He calls his captors tormenters. He calls Babylon a devastator. With very honest, human frustration, the writer dreams of payback. He can't help it. He expresses his desire in verse 9 that the tables might one day be turned on his captors.

While Israelites usually avoided the barbarism of foreign powers, like baby-smashing, he cries out a blessing on someone, anyone, who might one day smash *Babylon's* babies on rocks. *Let them one day feel our pain.* Context is everything in biblical exegesis, and in the Old Testament there is an intentional contrast between the atrocities of war and idolatrous child sacrifices of her neighbors, and the practices of Israel, the people chosen of God.

Idolatry, of course, is when we worship something other than God. Today, too many Christians

treat the Bible as an object of worship, almost as if it's a fourth part of the Holy Trinity. But his Word (*Jesus is the Word of God*: John 1:1-4, 14; Revelation 19:13) is a person who is alive, active, more powerful than a double-edged sword, and *not* confined to a book—not even the Holy Bible. □

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Bert Gary is a frequent contributor to PTM's publications and author of two books. In this compelling webcast interview with Greg Albrecht, Bert brings new insights into the meaning of Easter.