



July 8, 2007

## *Finishing Touches*

Some folks like to begin a puzzle by combining pieces in the center of the picture or by working in sections from various areas. I prefer to assemble the border and then work from there. The Bible is the same way. We can begin in the middle with the story of Christ and work our way outward so that we can integrate the prophetic with the revealed elements. We can also begin at the beginning and then watch the steady changes and final revelation and explanation that takes place. It does not matter how, or where, we begin our study as long as we remember the things that we have outlined so far. We have found that God has dealt with mankind through different mechanisms over the span of time. From the Patriarchal dispensation during which God spoke verbally to the heads of households, to the Mosaic dispensation, during which God provided a written law, but still could be consulted through His priests and prophets, to the final era, the Christian dispensation during which God has spoken through his son and inspired writers, we can follow the working of God as the plan to save mankind develops. If we remember to keep in mind the overall context of passages etc. we will begin to understand the Bible. We have referred to the term context and so it is appropriate to provide more exact detail as to what this refers to. Paul encourages Timothy to “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*” (2 Tim 2.15). Paul indicates that work is involved to understand the scriptures (**workman**). Paul indicates that this is an ongoing process (**study**) and states that this is an activity that is pleasing to God (**approved unto God**). The understanding of the context is implied in the statement “*rightly dividing*” the word. How do we understand the context of the passages that we are reading? There are considerations that will point us in the right direction. Once we have established the context we will more accurately perceive the meaning of what we are reading and will also be able to resolve the apparent conflicts that even some of the most renowned theologians have made, missing this valuable

point. **First** we must establish the dispensation under consideration in each passage. Do the events occur during the Patriarchal, Mosaic or Christian dispensation? This will have an effect on how people were to worship and act toward God. It will also determine what activities are allowed by God. Physical warfare, for example, was commanded under the Mosaic dispensation, but not under the Christian, no matter what the opinions of man are. **Secondly**, who is being addressed, or what is the passage about. The book of **Obadiah**, written during the Mosaic dispensation is addressed to the nation of Edom. Revelation in the New Testament is addressed to Christians under persecution in the first and second centuries. The Epistles, comprising most of the New Testament, are addressed to Christians, not unbelievers. The Gospels and the book of Acts are open to believers and unbelievers alike. A failure to understand these basic points will cause us to misunderstand the passages and misinterpret the doctrine presented. For example, there are those who think they can be saved “like the thief on the cross” rather than following the plan of salvation that we read about in the book of **Acts**. This is a failure to realize that (1) these events occurred during the final days of the Mosaic dispensation and (2) Christ had the authority to directly forgive sins being the son of God. Another example is the belief that confession, or a statement of belief will save one today. In spite of the fact that there are no examples of anyone being saved in the New Testament saying a prayer, there are those who continue to misunderstand passages such as **Rom 10.17-19** believing that a statement of belief and acceptance will save. Misunderstandings such as this also led to the Crusades during the Middle Ages, to rescue the “Holy Land”. Context is critical and misunderstanding this concept has led to death, destruction and false doctrine. We would not force pieces of our puzzle into a spot that they obviously do not belong in, nor would we expect part of the picture to appear outside the borders. We understand and observe context with our puzzles and we must also respect that when we study God’s word. We don’t want a puzzle that is misshapen or distorted. This is what happens to the Bible when we fail to apply these very simple principles.

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