

## No, the Bible wasn't written for you

Jonathan Foye

You've probably seen it before on social media.

A Bible quote in the context of someone's personal social media page, to describe a current personal situation. Or perhaps in a discussion about the Bible, you may have encountered the argument that the Bible was written to be read by everyone.

There are a few classic examples of this phenomenon.

Perhaps the one that sticks out the most is Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."

This verse has been widely used as inspiration, including as part of Shawn Michaels' ring gear when he returned to the WWE in 2002. In such contexts, it is [used to suggest a version of Christian triumphalism](#): namely that believers are strengthened by their faith and can do strong things.

Even read in a surface level way, with an eye only to the passages before and after 4:13, however, it is clear that Paul had something else in mind when he wrote this part of the letter.

The passage from here goes on, "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."

Pretty far from the impression that the verse gives by itself.

Of course, the question could be asked as to why this matters. If Philippians 4:13, say, gives hope to a Christian in times when that person needs it, then maybe the verse has served its purpose, even if it's not entirely accurate in its appropriation?

Yes and no.

Beyond risking being inaccurate (and not dealing with how the text was read in its own time), reading the Bible as our own personal source of #inspiration is arguably a narcissistic approach. It prevents us from reading some of the text's more difficult messages or finding some of the deeper nuances that lie beneath the surface of the Bible's 66 books. All of these texts, despite appearing in a convenient single volume translated into English, were written in languages that many of us do not understand, by authors with very different lived experiences to our own.

The text was not written for us. Acknowledging that we don't possess scriptures tightly, as the arbiters of its meaning, means acknowledging that we are limited in our efforts to understand it (as with any human endeavour to understand God, we should acknowledge our limitations). This means we need to work to understand it and this process is one that takes effort and time.

Thankfully, we are not without resources that can help us grapple with scripture. As [the Uniting Church's Basis of Union](#) points out, "...God has never left the Church without faithful and scholarly interpreters of Scripture, or without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God's living Word."

"In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith."

This brings us to a point for the church to consider, namely that we don't inherit key pieces of scripture on our own. Many parts of the Bible were intended for groups to read (Paul's letters, for instance, were intended to be read aloud to a large gathered community). We would do well to treat scripture as something we need one another's help with.