

Making Our Way



A McMAHON / CHEYNE PODCAST

#72 • Season 3 • Episode 11

11/19/2025

In Context

Our Hosts

Janet Cheyne McMahon is a lover of family, dogs, nature, travel, books, and music. Born south of the Mason-Dixon line, she left after 9 months for parts north, landing eventually in Michigan, which will always be “where I’m from.”

Love of learning led Jan to a Bachelor of Arts (History, Political Science) at the University of Michigan-Dearborn (Go Blue), and a Master of Arts (Library and Information Science) at the University of South Florida. Amid all that, studied for a time with Rob at Colorado State University, a pivotal time in their lives.

Worked at the U of M-Dearborn Library, and then The Salvation Army Florida Divisional Headquarters, with the greatest reward being in serving as the Divisional Librarian. A librarian is who Jan is “in my soul.”

Jan and Rob have made our home in Florida since 1983, and live now in retirement with their dog, Skye, who makes it all the best adventure. They travel as much as possible, spending time in nature and in diverse places on this amazing planet. It has all been, and continues to be a fascinating journey, with hope of making a difference, in small ways, by being brave enough to speak and act on behalf of others.

Rob McMahon is a native Michigander, born in Saginaw and raised in the suburbs of Detroit. Rob attended Michigan State University, graduating in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. He did graduate studies at the University of Michigan and the University of South Florida. Rob is retired, having spent 36 years in public education teaching both high school chemistry and biology and middle school science. He worked as a total quality management trainer for the Pinellas County School District and served four years as the president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association. Rob cofounded a non-profit total quality management training center, The Learning Co-op, for Teacher Unions interested in applying the W. Edwards Deming continuous improvement principles to their day-to-day operations. He worked with teacher unions in Colorado, Maryland, New Mexico, North Dakota, Texas and Michigan. He also worked in a similar capacity with Jim Shipley & Associates. In retirement Rob has written a series of science related children’s books, and enjoys traveling with his wife, Jan, and their Black Labrador Retriever, Skye.

Deanna Cheyne, born in St. John’s, Newfoundland, earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Toronto (1996), studying with such luminaries as Elmer Eisler, Doreen Rao, Greta Kraus, Lois Marshall, and Rosemarie Landry.

Dee taught music at Mississauga Christian Academy, served as music director for Meadowvale Bible Baptist Church (Mississauga, Ontario), served as Assistant Divisional Music Director for The Salvation Army in Florida, is a former member of Tampa’s Master Chorale, and, for the past 18 years, has been a public school teacher.

Dee has visit 36 of the 50 U.S. states, and 12 countries. Her favorite destinations include France, Prague, New Orleans, National Parks, & Hawaii.

Dee & Jim live in Florida with Brigus (Golden Retriever) and Pip (Teacup Yorkie).

James Cheyne, born in Galesburg, Illinois, earned a Bachelor of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from Michigan State University (1978); and a Master of Music degree (Theory and Composition) from the University of Illinois Urbana/Champaign (1981), studying with David Liptak, Salvatore Martirano, and Ben Johnston.

Jim has served as music director for The Salvation Army in Central Illinois & Eastern Iowa, Orlando Area Command, and the Florida Division, served as a pastor with The Salvation Army, and was a public school teacher for 17 years.

In travel so far, Jim has visited 50 states and 27 countries. His favorite travel destinations include National Parks, New Orleans, Newfoundland, Argentina, Prague, & France.

Jim continues to write music and support Dee’s musical endeavors, and cooks whenever absolutely necessary. Jim & Dee live in Florida with their dogs Brigus & Pip.



L-R: Brigus, Jim, Deanna, Skye, Jan, Rob.
Inset: Pip

In Context

#72 - Season 3; Episode 11

11/19/2025

Hosts: Dee & Jim.

Dee & Jim discuss 3 biblical passages that a very young Jim used to misunderstand because they were out of context. One used the wrong context, a second ignored the author's context, and a third ignored cultural context.

JIM (Voice-over): As Jan and Rob wend their way back from the waters of Central Europe, we have a follow-up to last week's episode about the Bible and our approach to it.

[Music begins]

Last week we talked in general terms. This week we get specific with three sample passages. The first example is something that Jesus said, or something that Jesus was said to have said, but that I don't think Jesus actually said. And that might sound a bit radical, but give it a chance; maybe you'll end up agreeing with me. The second example shows the problems that arise when one ignores the literary context of a verse, and a third example shows the problems of ignoring historical and cultural contexts. And Dee will get us started with all this when this music stops.

[Music ends]

DEE: So I know you've been a student of the Bible for a long time. You were a minister at one point, having gone to the training college, and I know even long before then you had interest in religious studies. And today you read tons of books. Like, our home is filled with books, and they're not just because of courses you've taken. You seek out certain authors and different things like that because you have a sincere interest in it, and you've had it, I would guess, most of your life. How has all of your reading and education changed how you read the Bible today?

JIM: Well, yeah, it has changed because as a kid, I was chronically gullible. I mean, really, if someone said - in authority - said something, I just, "Okay, that's it. That's the way it is." We've got these gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If someone told me that Matthew was following Jesus around and writing down everything that happened, just as it happened, I would go for it. I would say, sure. I could picture Matthew riding on a donkey. All the disciples are headed to Capernaum. He'd write down, "Here we are, going to Capernaum," and then on the side, he'd complain, "How come I'm always in the back of the row here? Why can't I be up there by Jesus like Peter, James, and John? They always get to do everything with him. They get to go sailing with him. It's always those three guys and I'm stuck back down here." And then he says, "Well maybe I shouldn't put that in." And then he'd noticed the whole caravan is pulling off to an exit and he's thinking, "Uh oh, Jesus might say something here. I've got to get my red ink ready," you know, because Jesus is talking. So he's got to write that in red. I would have believed that as a kid. kid. But later on I realized that the - do you know where red letter Bibles came from?

DEE: It's supposed to be the words of Jesus.

JIM: Yeah, the words of Jesus in red. I thought that was like an ancient idea. I looked it up. It's only like - it's around the turn of the last century. So, it's only about 125 years old. Some guy was thinking, "Hey, why not put the words of Jesus in red?" Because, in the King James Version, they'd never use quotation marks to show where someone starts to speak. I mean it's done in any Bible you get today, but in the King James Version they didn't have it. So, where exactly did the words of Jesus start? And where did they stop? And this was my first exercise in textual criticism, because I noticed something about the words of Jesus being in red. And it started with a section of Mark's gospel. It's in the 13th chapter. Jesus is talking about the end times - it's one of those "no one knows the day or hour passages," right? - where he's talking about the abomination of desolation. And then he says - it's right there in red - "Let the reader understand." And I'm thinking, "Wait a minute, why would Jesus say, 'let the reader understand?' It makes no sense if he's giving a talk to everybody and then he stops and says, 'Let the reader understand.'" That seems like the writer putting something in parentheses. "This is a really important point. He's just given a reference from the Hebrew scriptures, from the book of Daniel. You've got to remember this." So he the author writes in there, "let the reader understand." But in my red print Bible, it's written as something Jesus said. And I'm thinking, "I don't think Jesus said that."

DEE: So those words should be black.

JIM: I think that part should be in black.

DEE: Okay.

JIM: It's there in Mark 13, the section called the Little Apocalypse. It's over in Matthew 24, it's the same - it's a parallel passage. And over in Matthew 24 it also says, "Let the reader understand." Words to that effect, whatever translation you're dealing with. And I don't think that really is the words of Jesus. And then that got me thinking, "Did the people who made the red letter Bibles have other things that they said Jesus said that he didn't really say?" And I went to like - what would you say is the most famous verse in all the New Testament?

DEE: John 3:16.

JIM: Which is...?

DEE: "For God so loved the world..."

JIM: ...that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." And I'm thinking, "That doesn't sound like something Jesus would say, but in my Bible - red letter Bible - it's written in red ink, and to me it sounds like Jesus, who's just met Nicodemus - well, let me get to where it says it want. Do we want the King James on this? I'll use..."

DEE: Well that's the one that was just quoted, wasn't it?

JIM: Yeah. I'll use King James. And Jesus is talking about this, and he says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so even must the Son of Man be lifted up that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life." To me, that's the end of what Jesus says, and then the author of John's gospel goes on and makes a comment on it.

And he says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." It goes on talking about Jesus.

DEE: Right.

JIM: It doesn't sound like Jesus is saying these things. It sounds like the author of John's gospel is talking about what Jesus just said. And so, one way of looking at the Bible differently is if the red letters aren't there, where do Jesus' words actually start and finish?

DEE: Well what was the criteria for the people who decided what was in red to be in red.

JIM: That I don't know. I think it's just an editorial decision. Where did they break off? They broke off where it says, "After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judea." So obviously that's not what Jesus is saying.

DEE: Right.

JIM: And I just think it interrupts a little bit earlier. So that's that's one way of reading the Bible differently than I did before. It's those very recent editors who were assigning things to Jesus that I don't think really belong to Jesus. Another one growing up that I had was Philippians 4:13. Can you recite it with me?

DEE: Maybe if you started.

JIM: "I can do all...

TOGETHER: "...things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

JIM: That's King James. I even had it on a little wooden plaque that was in gold letters. For me, that was like my Superman verse. "I can do all things through Christ..." And if I combine that with this promise of "Ask anything in my name and I will do it" - if I have those two together, I can do anything. Can I make first string on the varsity football team? Why, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Can I take this math test without actually studying for it at all? Just pray enough? "I can do all things through Christ which strengthen me." It sounds like a superhero verse. That's going to be my motto for life. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Then if you actually try to do a math test without studying, you're gonna realize there's probably some fine print there someplace that you can you missed. So you have to go to the whole context of the verse. And so I want to read what Paul was saying just before then. And let's take this time to turn some pages. Now he's been in dire straits. He's thanking the Philippians for their care of him. Okay? And he says this. "I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me. Indeed you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstance I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress." He was talking about whatever his circumstances are, he has learned how to endure them because Christ strengthens him. So it's a much different feeling of the kind of hero verse that I thought it was when I was a kid. It's much more learning to be content, whether in plenty or in need, in sickness and in health, for better or worse. He has learned to find contentment in his situation.

DEE: Do you think Paul may have been referencing Jesus' words, which is, "Ask anything in my name," when he says that, or do you think that's completely different.

JIM: Well, here's the thing. Paul famously had some sort of an an ailment.

DEE: Yes.

JIM: A thorn in his side. And he had asked for that to be removed. Now, if he thought that Jesus' comments about "ask anything and I will do it" was the panacea, the cure all, for every thing of life's ailments or everything that we were in need of or anything that we wanted. If he really thought that was it, then someplace he missed the fine print because that burden was not lifted from him.

DEE: Was Jesus specifically talking to only a certain group when he said that, or is it an idea that is universal?

JIM: Well, that's a good question. That's a really good question. One of the things I've learned about the Bible is, look at what the intended audience is. Especially with Paul. He writes some things to the Galatians, some things to the Philippians, to the Corinthians, to the Thessalonians. He writes these different congregations with different circumstances and different needs and often in response to questions they have asked. Those answers are addressed to a particular situation. Does that mean we should take that answer and generalize it to the way we conduct our lives all the time? Or is it - is there something behind what he says that should give us wisdom over our circumstances which are different? That's a really good question. Whether Jesus is talking to his disciples, if he's talking to someone and tells them to give up all they have, sell it, give to the poor, is he talking to one person? Is he talking to everybody? These are the sorts of things that have informed my interpretation of scripture since I was that chronically gullible kid, and I think it's really worth the discussion. I don't think AI is going to give you the answer. I don't think Googling it's going to give you the answer. I think the circumstances are something that when I read this, this comes to mind. And I am now motivated to do this or that thing.

DEE: Don't you think when Christ says - is addressing his disciples and he's saying to them, "Ask anything in my name" - "in my name," I believe, is key there - he's talking to his followers, not just literally the 12 disciples, just those 12 individuals, but to anyone who follows him.

JIM: Well, as a procedure, I think every passage should be looked at in that light. Who is he talking to? What's the implication? What does that mean for us? Those are great questions that I think are a little bit beyond the the scope of our immediate discussion. Have I just dodged the question?

DEE: No. I don't think so.

JIM: I I meant to.

DEE: Oh.

JIM: So there's there's that passage in Paul that I read differently. Because this is a quick episode, just one more I want to point out. And that comes from the Psalms. Now this is something where I think there's context - immediate context - in the writer that changes the way I read it now. This is Psalm 121. And it's one of these favorite verses. Let me read it out

of the King James because that's the way that it's often depicted. Psalms. That's Old Testament, right?

DEE: *[laughs]*

JIM: Here it is. Here's the verse. It says, "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help." I see posters made with that - memes with that. They get some great picture out of the National Geographic or National Parks calendar of some mountains, maybe some clouds overhead, maybe sun streaming through the clouds, and it says, "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help." It sounds very positive. Well wait a minute. What were the hills the psalmist is talking about? Because there's great criticism in the prophetic voice about worship that is done up in the hills, up in the high places. These are the worship places and the altars that were made to Baal or Ishtar or other gods of the area that Israel was supposed to avoid. So when I read it now, I read it with kind of a rhetorical irony, because it's the way that it comes right into the next verse. And actually, let me get, uh, New Revised Standard for this one. Psalms. That's Old Testament, right?

DEE: *[rolls eyes]*

JIM: I've been reading the the Jewish Bible for so long, I've got all of my books out of order now. Okay, so this is a Song of Ascent. They're on their way up to Jerusalem for worship. And so it says, "I lift up my eyes to the hills," then in the form of a question, "from whence will my help come?" And then it says, "My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." I read it this way. I think it's using some rhetorical irony here, and I think the person is saying, "Should I look to the hills for help? Is that where my help is going to come from? Should I go to these high places - all these altars that are around that people go to for help all the time - is that where my help comes from?" And then that says, "No, my help comes from the Lord."

I think that is the purpose of that verse. And it's really kind of a sad thing because it's this beautiful, meditative, calm sort of verse - "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help" - and it sounds like this vote of assurance that I'm living in the comfort of the Lord. But I really think it's got an attack against the worship in the high places of all the other religious voices in the land. "Do I look to those mountains for my help? No, my help comes from the Lord." And this is an assurance as they're going up to Jerusalem for this.

So that's one way that I look into the history of what's going on in the land, and then get a different meaning for a text that's very familiar to me. And I'm a little bit sad about it because the hymn-like quality with this picture of beautiful mountainous nature is very appealing. But I think it's meant in a different way. It's a rejection of the common religion around the people and the things that the Israelites were told not to do.

In fact, there is a passage in Ezekiel that comes to mind. Let me see if I can find it quickly. Uh, Ezekiel's talking about what is a righteous person. Here it is. Ezekiel 18:5. "If a man is righteous" - he's going to do a bunch of these uh statements, "if, if, if, if," and then the end there will be a "then." So what are the ifs? He starts in the fifth verse. "If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right, if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel..." See that? He's using the same language. "If I don't lift up my eyes and go to those mountains and that, then such a one is righteous, he shall surely live, says the LORD God." So I think that Psalm 121 is saying the same thing Ezekiel

says. "Do I look to the mountains and get help from there? No. My help comes from the Lord.

'He will not let your foot give way; your guardian will not slumber; See, the guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. The LORD is your guardian, the LORD is your protection at your right hand. By day the sun will not strike you, nor the moon by night. The LORD will guard you from all harm; He will guard your life. The LORD will guard you going and coming now and forever.'"

That's the whole psalm. You don't find those things elsewhere; you find those things in the Lord. I think both Ezekiel and the psalm writer of Psalm 121 are saying the same thing. Now that's another thing where that takes some study. A little kid reading that out of Psalm 121 won't have that background. So the study that you'll find in these books on these shelves bring some of that out. What is the actual environment that these people are working with or working against? That sort of reading brings a little bit more definition to the reading of the scripture. Does that make sense?

DEE: Yeah.

JIM: So there's one I did kind of light. The red letter Bibles I learned was actually a later edition. I can read it and say, "Wait a minute, this doesn't sound like it should be on Jesus' lips. It sounds like it belongs to the one who's writing things down and talking about Jesus." And then there was another one where the way as a kid I had read Philippians 4:13. And one verse can fit on a plaque, but you need context. And when you have context that doesn't fit on a plaque too well, you learn a little bit more and say, "Wait a minute, it actually doesn't mean what I thought it meant, and I've got to take it a different way now." And then with further study, you get into some of the history and context of what's being written. And then, like in Psalm 121, I read that differently now than the way I used to read it as a kid. So those are just three examples. And I have on my list here, I have 112 more. Do you want to do those now?

DEE: No.

JIM: No? Oh. Okay.

[Music begins]

JIM (voice-over): So what do you think? Did Jesus really say everything our red letter Bibles attribute to him? Did Paul have a secret formula for great success in all our endeavors? And what exactly was in those hills around ancient Jerusalem? Blessing or curse? We recorded this episode just as Jan and Rob were returning from another Viking River tour, and one day soon we'll get them back to the mics to regale us with tales of adventure.

For now, thank you for your company today.

Until next time.

[Music ends]