

# Reading the Bible for Understanding

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# Do You Understand What You Are Reading?

## Scripture

**Acts 8:26–40** tells the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, who was seeking to understand God’s message but needed someone to interpret the Scripture.

**Psalm 119:97–105** offers praise and thanks to God for the instruction and benefits that come from Israel’s sacred writings.

**Luke 24:13–35** relates the encounter of two men with Jesus on the Emmaus road following the resurrection.

## Prayer

Gracious God, by your word you created the world, and through that word you sustain it. For these things, we sing your praises. Even more, we praise you for sending your Word in the flesh, in Jesus Christ, that we might be redeemed through him. We thank you, too, for giving us the words of the Scriptures in order to know Christ and to follow him. By the power of the Spirit, illumine our hearts as we read the Bible, so that our reading will be profitable and we will grow in grace. Amen.

## Introduction

The title of this lesson reproduces Philip’s question to the Ethiopian official as he puzzled over the book of Isaiah (Acts 8:30). It’s a good question to ask ourselves, too. Do we understand the Bible as we read it? Further, how can we comprehend it more fully?

In the ancient world reading was normally done aloud. As Philip came alongside the official’s chariot, he likely realized already that this traveler was reading Isaiah 53, the familiar passage about the Suffering servant. The uncertainty expressed by the traveler reflects the fact that this passage could be interpreted in different ways—as a reference either to the nation or to an unidentified individual. For Christians, of course, the passage was quickly applied to the suffering and death of Jesus.

That the Ethiopian eunuch was on his way home after worshipping at the temple suggests that he understood something of Israel's faith. Nevertheless, this mysterious passage was beyond him, and he wished for a guide to help him understand it. As we will see shortly, the Reformation tradition has always emphasized that the basic message of the Bible can be clearly understood. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing of the mysterious in the sacred texts.

Biblical passages can be mysterious because the context or concepts are unfamiliar to us. As someone or something guides us—perhaps a teacher, a preacher, or a Bible commentary—we can understand the passage better. Some things in Scripture are so profound, however, that we will never understand them in their full depth.

There is another way in which the Bible can be mysterious. In Psalm 119:97, the writer exclaims, “How I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.” The writer knows there are treasures in the divine writings that are only revealed by concentrated study. Such study uncovers insights and riches that are “sweeter than honey to my mouth” (v. 103). Concentrated study can help us interpret the Bible better, and proper interpretation is highly important because of the goal: we are seeking to grow in our knowledge and love of God.

## **Sufficient and Clear**

The Christian tradition has always taught that we should rejoice in the Scriptures. As God's revelation, the Bible enables us to know something of both God's nature and our nature as created beings. We can thus be thankful the Lord of heaven and earth has given us the Scriptures. But can we say more than this? In the sixteenth century, John Calvin and other Reformers concluded that two specific attributes of the Bible are particularly important.

One attribute is *sufficiency*. Simply put, the Bible tells us the basics—what we need to know to live in this world and to love God. By the late Middle Ages, the church had come to believe that the biblical revelation needed to be supplemented by various beliefs and practices that had grown up across the church's long history and must be considered equally authoritative with the Bible. Examples of these beliefs and practices include indulgences, the veneration of Mary, and papal infallibility.

The confessions of the Reformation spoke of sufficiency to counter these claims. The Scots Confession of 1560 says, “We affirm that in [the Old and New Testaments] all things necessary

to be believed for the salvation of man are sufficiently expressed.”<sup>1</sup> The confessions did not deny the value of tradition in general but claimed that tradition cannot serve as an equal source of revelation. Everything we need to know, they stressed, can be found in the Bible.

Tragically, this affirmation about the Bible took on special relevance in the twentieth century when Hitler’s Nazi regime demanded the German Church to support its policies. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, in 1934, rejected the “false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation” anything beyond the “one Word of God.”<sup>2</sup>

*Clarity* is the other attribute of Scripture underlined by the Reformers. The point is not that everything in the Bible is obvious. Rather, the essential message of salvation in Christ comes through plainly in Scripture. By the late Middle Ages, the church had come to believe that the biblical revelation needed to be interpreted by a special class of people, primarily the priests. The church held that the Scriptures are obscure and liable to easy misinterpretation. Laypersons were not to read on their own because they would surely be led astray into false doctrine and an immoral, or at least improper, lifestyle.

The Reformation confessions spoke of the clarity of Scripture precisely to counter these claims. For instance, the Westminster Confession asserts that everything necessary for salvation is “so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other” that both the “learned” and “unlearned” can understand adequately.<sup>3</sup> While admitting not everything is clear, the confessions emphasized that no intermediaries are necessary to interpret the Bible. Trained leaders can certainly help, but you and I can understand the basic message of Scripture if we read carefully and thoughtfully with open hearts.

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## **Illumination of the Holy Spirit**

The Protestant Reformers wanted to assure all believers in Christ that God has provided in the Scriptures sufficient knowledge of

1. *Book of Confessions*, 3.18.

2. *Ibid.*, 8.12.

3. *Ibid.*, 6.007.

God's will and ways. That knowledge is accessible to everyone, whether laypersons or members of the clergy. This is fine as far as it goes, but the Reformers were aware that something further is needed to make the message of the Bible a living Word in our hearts. "The Word will not find acceptance in human hearts," wrote John Calvin, "before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

This necessity of an inward "testimony" or "illumination" of the Spirit is a key point for our understanding the Scriptures. Not only does the Holy Spirit inspire the Bible in the first place; this same Spirit makes the words of Scripture come alive in us. That is why Word and Spirit are mentioned in tandem so often in the Reformed tradition. You truly can't have the one without the other.

The connection of Word and Spirit is also why worship liturgies frequently preface the reading of the Scripture lesson with a prayer of illumination. The prayer is an appeal to the Spirit of God to shine divine light on these words and to make them productive in the lives of the hearers.

The Reformers believed our minds are perfectly capable of understanding the words in the Bible. However, without a further inward working of the Spirit, those words will never reach to the depths of our being. The Spirit "testifies" to our spirits that these words are God's word. Said differently, the Spirit "illuminates" our hearts so that we recognize the truth of these words and come to value them for our lives.

In the Bible, this process is captured best in Luke's account of the two disciples who meet a stranger on the road to Emmaus (ch. 24). The two are traveling away from Jerusalem when the risen Jesus appears but does not identify himself. They hear his voice and listen to his words. However, until he blesses and breaks the bread with them at the table, they do not recognize him (v. 30). Then as they realize who he is, they also recall that even on the road their "hearts burned within them" while Jesus was speaking (v. 32). This wonderful story illustrates the effect of the Spirit's interior work as we not only hear the words of God but also take them into our hearts.

We obviously cannot control the Spirit's work in our hearts, but we can certainly cultivate some attitudes that will make us more

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4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.7.4.

receptive to the Spirit. For one thing, we can approach the Bible with humility, recognizing our need for these words. We can also exhibit reverence for the Bible, knowing that these are the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Finally, we can approach the Bible with expectation, anticipating that we will hear the very word of God speaking in these pages.

## **Some Guidelines for Interpretation**

Even when the words of the Bible are sufficient and clear and the Spirit opens our hearts to these words, we do not always escape without some hard work in interpreting individual passages correctly. More distressing, perhaps, is that we can end up debating the appropriate doctrinal or ethical positions to take in our attempts to be faithful servants of Christ.

At this point, proper interpretation becomes essential to reading the Bible. Some years ago, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted a list of seven guidelines to help assure that we interpret passages adequately and accurately. Here we will look at five of them.

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1. *Honor Jesus Christ as the center of the Scriptures.* The whole history of the Old and New Testaments is oriented toward the salvation of the world through the work of God’s Son. Thus, while it is important to understand Old Testament passages in their own setting, it is essential to recognize that the overarching concern of the Bible is redemption in Jesus Christ.

2. *Respect the “rule of faith.”* From the church’s early history, Christians have discussed—and sometimes heatedly debated—appropriate doctrinal understandings and moral practices in relation to following Jesus Christ. Over time as a consensus was reached regarding a particular doctrinal or ethical issue, it was included automatically in what came to be called the *regula fidei*, the “rule of faith.” This guideline encourages us in our contemporary discussions always to take into account the consensus of the church and interpret the Bible in ways consistent with it.

3. *Follow the “rule of love.”* The commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” goes back to Leviticus 19:18, which Jesus called one of the two great commandments (Matthew 22:39). In times of disagreement, it is easy to forget this basic admonition. This guideline calls us to maintain a loving attitude to others even if we disagree strongly with them about the appropriate interpretation of scriptural passages.

4. *Take care to interpret in light of the entire Bible.* One of the difficulties we face is a tendency to cherish favorite passages, books, and even sections of the Bible. Technically, it is called embracing a canon within the canon. The antidote is to be sure to consider the witness of the whole Bible as we seek to understand the implications of individual passages.

5. *Focus on the plain text of Scripture.* Interpreters have always been tempted to go beyond the basic meanings intended by the original authors of the Bible. From the time of the early church, the method of allegory was popular because it could discover more profound, hidden meanings in the stories and sayings in Scripture. Other times, people have simply embellished the text in order to make it, seemingly, more meaningful or useful for their teaching and preaching. The Reformed confessions, however, stress that we should seek the plain meaning, that is, the primary sense intended when the author originally composed the passage. In session 3, we will say more about this principle.

## **Spiritual Practice**

Recall a person or persons who helped you to understand what you were reading in the Bible. How did they help you, and in what way or ways was your understanding illuminated by their guidance?

## **Questions for Reflection**

How has your relationship with the Bible changed throughout your lifetime? To what do you attribute these changes?

How do you square the clarity of the biblical revelation with the many seemingly mysterious and obscure passages in the Bible?

Visualize yourself with the two disciples on the Emmaus road. How do you imagine you would have felt? What thoughts—or perhaps questions—would have been foremost for you?