

Understanding The Bible

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Much has been written and said to help Christians understand the Bible, inasmuch as the Bible is our chart and compass unto eternal life anything which will help us understand it should be received with appreciation. Unfortunately, however, the ideas offered by many Bible interpreters are neither sure nor simple avenues to a better understanding of the Scriptures.

Often the method followed by those who would help us understand the Bible is that of *explanation*. At no time is it necessary to pay more careful attention to what a man is saying as when he is "explaining" something. Many "explanations" of the Bible attempt to *make the Bible plain* by bringing in more than is written or by leaving out some of what is written. The idea of such "explaining" seems to be that the Bible needs a little "fixing" so that it can be "plainly" understood.

Some time ago my attention was drawn to an "explanation" of the Lord's miracle of feeding the multitude with a few loaves and little fishes. The whole incident was treated in such a way as to turn it into a sort of "sentimental neighborliness." What happened (according to this explanation) was that the multitude shared each other's food in congregational "covered dish supper" style.

The "miracle" apparently now was that anyone would offer to share his food with any stranger. More could be said about such a bland disregard of the New Testament in the use of this incident. But my point is that here was an example of a sort of "explaining". Actually, it was a rather crude "explaining away" that not only did violence to our Lord's personal integrity but also completely misrepresented the Scripture.

Such treatment of Bible material does not help me to *understand the Bible*, it actually tends to confuse me as to what the Bible really means.

If a Bible teacher sympathetically discusses the Virgin Birth I should listen with respect and interest. But if he then deals with the Bible account in such a way as to make out there was no Virgin Birth, he has not helped me to *understand* the Bible: he has only proposed that I not accept the record as true. Anyone who discusses the resurrection of Jesus Christ in such a way as to persuade me that the earthly body of Jesus Christ was not raised out of the tomb has *not* helped me to *understand* the resurrection. He has simply helped me to disbelieve the resurrection story as it is set forth in the Bible and made me to doubt all else the Bible says.

The miracles recorded in the Bible as the works of Jesus Christ can never be *understood* by any "explanation" which proposes to show that nothing supernatural happened. For *explanation* to be true it must *explain* the miracle in such fashion that when I understand the explanation I still have the miracle.

“UNDERSTAND” DOES NOT MEAN “DESTROY”

To understand "honesty" is not to destroy "honesty." Understanding love never removes its glory. The more you understand loyalty the more wonderful it is! Understanding health does not make one sick, and understanding death does not return the dead one to life. In fact when I understand something it actually becomes more real than ever before. When I *understand* more of what Christ Jesus suffered for me, I become more thankful than ever for His wonderful Grace.

Understanding the Bible is naturally difficult because the Bible brings a message from God (Who is invisible) about our souls (which are intangible) in the light of eternity (which we cannot comprehend as

human beings). Part of this difficulty can be avoided if we do not try to understand God in Himself, but remain content to try to understand His will for us. And, especially, we shall never understand the Bible if we look at it only from the human, or earthly, point of view.

The problem of understanding the Bible is related to the problem of understanding Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible is the Word of God literate, as Jesus Christ was the Word of God incarnate. If we look at Jesus of Nazareth as *only a man* we will never "see" Him as the Son of God Who came to save us by His death and resurrection. And to look at the Bible as *only human literature* will never lead us to receive it (or to understand it) "not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (I Thess. 2:13).

Thousands saw Jesus of Nazareth as a man, even a good man, but never came to faith that they might belong to Him. Today thousands read the Bible as a human book, even a good book, but never come to faith that they might be saved. Since many criticized Jesus of Nazareth it is not surprising that many today criticize the Bible. Many saw and heard Jesus Christ yet believed not. That fact did not change Jesus Christ nor hinder His work in those who did believe in Him. And disbelief today does not change the Bible nor weaken its power in those who believe it as the Word of God.

In order to understand the Bible it is necessary,

I. TO RECOGNIZE THE BIBLE FOR WHAT IT IS: the revelation of the Will of God.

It is a *hidden* revelation. The Lord told Peter (Matt. 16:13-20), "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven". He told His disciples (Matt 11:25-27), in praying to His Father, "Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes". The Bible becomes plain as the Holy Spirit reveals the things of God to us.

It is a *spiritual* revelation. It deals with the invisible realities of the Spirit: God, Heaven, the soul, eternity, etc.

It is a *proven* revelation. Peter remarks "we have also a more sure word of prophecy". The fulfillment of so many specific predictions has certified the whole Bible as "none surer" for our confidence.

It is a *manifested* revelation. The Bible is to be taken truly as the Word of God. The Lord Jesus was the Word of God manifested in human form. "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:7-11). The Bible *IS* what God has revealed. To be just a "record" of a separate revelation is to suggest that it may not be revelation at all.

It is an *effective* revelation. Souls are saved by calling on the God whose promises are set forth in the Bible (Romans 10:8-17). And the Bible, honestly used, effectually works Grace in the heart of believers.

II. TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE LETTER ALONE DOES NOT REVEAL

Seeing Jesus of Nazareth as a man was not sufficient to enable persons to understand, "perceive", "know", Him as the Son of God (Matt 11:27). Reading the Scriptures alone is not enough to enable the heart to understand. The heart must be illumined by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul spoke of people who read the Scriptures but could never understand them because they refused to accept Jesus as the Christ (II Cor. 3:12-16). This suggests the phenomenon so notoriously demonstrated in our time of men who are expert in reading and studying the Bible as literature, who never have seen or accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

III. TO RECOGNIZE THAT GOD WILL REVEAL THE MEANING OF THE BIBLE WHEN THE HEART IS WILLING to respond in obedience to God.

Nothing could be clearer than the Word of the Lord Jesus, "if any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine" (John 7:17). Apparently the prerogative of granting insight into the truth of the Bible belongs to God Himself. It was possible for men to walk and to talk with the risen Lord Jesus without recognizing who He was (John 20:14-15; Luke 24:16). Even the understanding of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and Savior, was not the result of Peter's human association with or observation of Jesus of Nazareth, but something given to him from God the Father in heaven (Matthew 16:17). So it is with the meaning of the Bible.

On one occasion the disciples asked the Lord Jesus why He did not speak as plainly to the public as He did to them in private (Matt. 53:10). The answer given by the Lord should be soberly pondered by everyone who wants to understand the Bible. For apparently there is such a thing as "hearing they hear not, *neither do they understand.*" Isaiah commented on people who "closed their eyes" in rebellion against the Word of God until their "heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing . . . lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should *understand* with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them" (Matt. 13:15 and Isa. (6:9-10). This could well be the condition noted by Paul in II Cor. 3:13-15. And it may point directly to the solemn truth implied in II Thess. 2:10-12. God is the supreme Judge of the human heart: He "resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble". It is a comfort to remember that "a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

IV. TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE CLUE TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE IS JESUS CHRIST THE SON OF GOD.

Philip was led by the Holy Spirit to join the Ethiopian who was reading the Bible while riding in his chariot. He was reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8:27-39). Philip asked him the very same question we are discussing: "Understandest thou what thou readest?" The answer of the Ethiopian points directly to the real issue: "How can I, except some man should guide me?"

The Ethiopian truly realized he needed guidance. He could not yet know what John pointed out in his first epistle about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers (I John 2:27). For Christians actually are not dependent upon human teachers: "You need not that any man teach you" because the Holy Spirit has been given to guide us into all truth. It is the distinct function of the Holy Spirit to show us the "things of Jesus Christ".

Thus we come in our thinking to the root of the whole matter. Understanding the Bible is possible only when the portion studied is related to the truth in Jesus Christ. This is altogether outside the scope of human experience or understanding: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit" (1 Cor. 3:9-10). And the human mind continues to be blind to such truth as long as it continues in its natural processes (I Cor. 3:14). When the heart is unwilling to accept Jesus Christ and to receive the Holy Spirit, the mind can never understand the Bible. Humbly yielded and willing souls can read the Bible with much profit. "The entrance of thy Word giveth light." Proud, rebellious, unyielded hearts may be "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." Philip has set us all a clear example when he "began at the same Scripture, and preached unto him Jesus".

A final word: Although it is the Holy Spirit alone Who enables us to understand the Bible and a yielded heart is necessary for the Holy Spirit to be heard — in a strange but marvelous way the Bible itself is often the means whereby the Holy Spirit gains an entrance that He may command the heart. In this connection we speak of God's Word as a "means of Grace" and the Scripture quoted in the last paragraph, "The entrance of Thy Word giveth light" (Psa. 119:130), suggests the pattern. The Spirit uses the Bible to gain entrance, speaking from God's Word to convince and convict and to produce that state of being yielded which leads to the understanding of God's Word.