

# **Can the Bible Be Understood?**

## *Selected Texts*

### **Introduction**

This morning, we continue with our series on the Bible, asking the question, “Can the Bible be understood?” Another way to pose this question would be to ask, “Is the Bible clear?” In one sense, you might be thinking, “Isn’t it obvious? How can you even ask the question about the clarity of Scripture? If Scripture was clear, then there would not be so much division in the church. If Scripture was clear, then there would not be so many different interpretations, theological disagreements, and even denominations.” These are not unfair questions, but they do reveal that we are not thinking rightly about what it means to consider Scripture as clear and understandable. So, this morning, we are going to consider what Scripture teaches about its own clarity.

For some of you, though, the question of the clarity of Scripture seems unnecessary. You might be thinking, “Well, I believe it’s clear. Why wouldn’t someone else believe it’s clear? Is there even a biblical precedent for considering this question?” If you are in that camp this morning, I would just remind you that sin entered the world because before the Word of God was disobeyed, its clarity was questioned. When Satan tempted Eve in the garden, he challenged the clarity of God’s Word. “Has God really said?” Thus, I believe a brief but thorough consideration of this belief is warranted because, not unlike Adam and Eve, our rebellion against God often begins with our questioning of the clarity of God’s Word. I see this all the time in society and even Christian communities. They ask questions like, “Does God’s Word really forbid abortion?” Or “Does God’s Word really forbid sexual immorality like pornography, adultery, or homosexuality?” Or “Does God’s Word really teach that Jesus is the only way to salvation?”

In each of these questions and questions like this, if you listen closely, you can hear echoes of the Serpent’s deceit in Eden, whispering anew, “Has God really said?” Thus, we should pay attention to what God has said and how He has said it...

### **Exposition - Scripture’s Claims Regarding Its Own Clarity**

Following the guidance of theologian, John Feinberg, I am breaking up the passages for our consideration into three categories:

#### **I. Passages Affirming the Clarity of Scripture**

**Deuteronomy 29:29** – “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”

This passage distinguishes between the “secret things” (i.e., the non-revealed things that belong to God) and the “revealed things” that belong to us. Moses goes on to define what the “revealed things” are in verse 29: “all the word of this law.”

Now, given what we learned about the nature of Scripture a few weeks ago regarding how “the Bible is God’s Word,” it is not hard to conclude that all of the Bible falls within the category of “the revealed things.” So, while it is certainly true that there are “secret things that belong to the LORD,” there are also things that have been revealed that belong to us.

In other words, things that have been revealed to us that we will be held accountable for knowing and acting upon or rebelling against as human beings created by God for His glory.

In the next chapter of Deuteronomy, in **Deuteronomy 30:11-14**, Moses affirms again the clarity of God's Word to His people, stating, "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. <sup>12</sup> It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' <sup>13</sup> Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, 'Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' <sup>14</sup> No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." Moses' point here is clear: God's commands are not hidden. They have been revealed. They are "not too difficult for you or beyond your reach." To put it another way, no can say to the LORD, "You didn't make yourself clear." Or, "I just didn't understand because you were an ineffective communicator."

As we will see later on, the problem with our misunderstanding of Scripture is not because God has failed to communicate but they we have failed to understand. And that is an important distinction to be made regarding the question, "Can the Bible be understood?" Just because a person who closes their eyes cannot see the light, it does not mean that the room that they are in is dark. Which is interesting because the Bible often speaks of God and His Word as light. Notice the next three passages: **Psalm 119:105**, **Psalm 119:130**, and **Proverbs 6:20-24**.

**Psalm 119:105** says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." **Psalm 119:130** declares, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." **Proverbs 6:20-24** instructs us, "My son, keep your father's command and do not forsake your mother's teaching. <sup>21</sup> Bind them always on your heart; fasten them around your neck. <sup>22</sup> When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you. <sup>23</sup> For this command is a lamp, this teaching is a light, and correction and instruction are the way to life, <sup>24</sup> keeping you from your neighbor's wife, from the smooth talk of a wayward woman."

With each of these passages, the emphasis is on the illuminating quality of the Word of God. Light overcomes darkness. Yet, the reason, according to **John 3:16-21** that many people do not come to the light is because they love the darkness. It is not because the light is not shining. It is not because the light is not powerful. It is not because the light does not accomplish what God intends for it to accomplish, it is because people love their darkness. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God."

With each of the verses that we have considered under the heading, “Passages Affirming the Clarity of Scripture,” we encounter God’s Word declaring that there is an inherent quality of clarity in Scripture because it is a result of God’s work through His Holy Spirit and God does not fail to communicate clearly when He intends to communicate.

**T.S. – Having briefly considered passages that affirm the clarity of Scripture, we move to...**

## **II. Passages Implying the Clarity of Scripture**

In this section, we are considering passages that while not overtly affirming the clarity of Scripture, implicitly teach that Scripture is clear. Admittedly, there are a ton of passages that fit into this category, but for the sake of time, I will only explore a few.

The first passage comes from Deuteronomy again: **Deuteronomy 6:4-7**, which says, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” Obviously, if the people could teach these truths to their children, talk about them with others, and meditate upon them when getting ready for bed and when waking up, the implication is that these truths were sufficiently clear. They were understandable. Does this mean that they could be known exhaustively? No. But it does mean that these things can be known truly.

Consider the confidence of the psalmist in **Psalms 19:7-8**, which says, “The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. <sup>8</sup> The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.” Notice how the psalmist speaks with certainty about the ability of God’s Word: refreshing the soul, making wise the simple, giving joy to the heart, giving light to the eyes. This is what God’s Word does!

Passing over several more examples from the Old Testament, we jump to the New Testament, which is full of passages that imply the clarity of Scripture. Theologian Wayne Grudem listed dozens of passages from the gospels in which Jesus questioned his audience about their lack of understanding. Notably, Jesus never blamed his audience’s lack of understanding on a lack of clarity in the Old Testament. “Jesus blames the misunderstanding not on the Scriptures themselves but on those who misunderstand or fail to accept them.”

**Matthew 12:3** – Have you not read what David did...

**Matthew 12:5** – Have you not read in the Law...”

**Matthew 19:4** – Have you not read...”

**Matthew 21:42** – Have you never read in the Scriptures...

**Matthew 22:31** – Have you not read what was said to you by God...

**Matthew 22:29** – You are wrong, because you know neither the Scripture nor the power of God...

**Luke 24:25** – O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!

Another example of the assumption of the clarity of Scripture is found in the way that the apostle Paul wrote his letters to congregations. He didn't simply write the letters to the church leaders. He wrote them to the congregation because he expected them to understand them and live in obedience to what they received.

**Matthew 28:18-20**, reveals that Jesus believed God's Word could be taught and understood by people from all over the world. <sup>18</sup> Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" Does the fact that God's Word should be taught mean that it is not understandable? Of course not! The idea that a message is clear and understandable doesn't mean that it cannot also be taught. It simply means that it is an accessible message of truth that either through reading or hearing can be understood.

Will everyone understand it? No. Is that because the message cannot be understood or is not clear? No. It is because those who read it or heard it refuse to see it or hear it for what it is: the message of God's salvation for His glory and our good.

The apostle Paul addresses this specifically in **2 Timothy 3:14-4:5**, writing,

<sup>14</sup> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, <sup>15</sup> and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup> All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

<sup>4:1</sup> In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: <sup>2</sup> Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. <sup>3</sup> For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. <sup>4</sup> They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. <sup>5</sup> But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry."

This passage in 2 Timothy is very rich! It assumes the clarity of Scripture in the testimony of Timothy's own upbringing, "how you have known the Scriptures from infancy" by virtue of the faithful work of his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. (And just as a sidenote here, grandparents and parents, please do not underestimate the impact of the Word of God on the children that God has entrusted to you.

By the grace of Christ and power of the Holy Spirit, you are shaping and forming them in profound ways, even when you don't see it, and many times you will not see it for years. But do not doubt the power of God's Word in the lives of your children.) Ok, that's for another message, back to the text: 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5.

After commending the Scriptures in Timothy's life, Paul goes on to explicitly affirm the impact that the Scriptures have by virtue of their God-breathed nature: "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." If Scripture is not clear and not understandable, then it cannot be profitable in the ways that Paul speaks of in this passage.

**T.S. – But what about the passages of Scripture that seem to contradict or limit this idea of the clarity of Scripture? How can we reconcile those passages with the passages that we have just considered?**

### **III. Passages Limiting the Clarity of Scripture**

The first passage we will consider is in Matthew 13, which is pretty long, so I will not read it in its entirety, but to summarize, it is the parable of the seeds and soils. For those who are not familiar with this parable, it is the story that Jesus tells regarding how there was a man who was sowing seeds and the seeds that were tossed fell into different types of soil. This parable was teaching the audience about the kingdom of God, specifically how different people received the message of the kingdom differently. Some people have pointed to this parable and said, "See, there are some people who cannot and do not receive the message of the kingdom. Thus, the message must not be clear or understandable." Others then point to the fact that Jesus even says that he speaks in parables so that "seeing they may not see and hearing they may not hear," which to some, sounds like an intentional obscuring of the message. These critiques, however, of the clarity of Scripture fail to distinguish between the clarity of the message and the reception of the message. A message does not have to be received or accepted in order to be clear. And, if you pay close attention to the parable, the seed that was sown, (the message of the kingdom) was the same message. It was only the soils that were different.

The same could be said for Jesus' comment about "hearing and seeing." Jesus often concluded his teaching with the following word, "He who has ears, let him hear," which sounds a little odd to us, but essentially highlighted the fact that there were some in the audience who while hearing with their physical ears and seeing with their physical eyes were still spiritually deaf and spiritually blind.

In such cases, just like with the different types of soils, the problem was not with the clarity of Jesus' message, but with the condition of the audience's heart. In fact, many times they understood what Jesus was saying with such clarity that they resolved to put him to death right then and there. They needed the Spirit of God to open their hearts to receive the message like Lydia's heart in the book of Acts. Their rejection however was due to the hardening of their heart, which resulted from their rebellion against God.

This is what Paul has in mind in **1 Corinthians 2:14-15**, when he talks about the “spiritual man” and how “spiritual things are spiritually discerned.” To the “natural man,” or the “unsaved person,” there will certainly be things about Scripture that are unclear, but this is not because the Scriptures themselves are unclear but because the unbeliever has rejected Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. To reject Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, who bears witness to Christ, is to reject God’s greatest revelation of Himself. Those who have done this will not receive the message of Scripture, but again, this is not because it is unclear. In fact, many times, it is because Scripture is so clear. Scripture calls unbelievers to repent of their sins and place their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. Scripture tells the unbeliever, “You are a sinner because you sin and you cannot save yourself by your good works. You can only be saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.” And understanding this clear message, the unbeliever says, “No. That doesn’t apply to me. I hear you, but I don’t need that.” Thus, demonstrating how clear Scripture is by fulfilling what Jesus taught about humanity’s need to be born again in order to see the Kingdom of God (John 3).

Finally, we come to what some critics consider to be the “clobber text” which undermines this idea of the clarity of Scripture: **2 Peter 3:15-16**. In this passage, Peter is talking about the Paul’s message. He writes, “<sup>15</sup> Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. <sup>16</sup> He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.” In this passage, critics pick up on the fact that Peter explicitly states that “some things” that Paul writes “are hard to understand.” Does this passage undermine the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture? It does not. The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture does not promise that all of Scripture will easily be understood or that all Scripture is equally clear. Something will be harder than others but notice what **2 Peter 3:15-16** says and doesn’t say. It says, “that are hard to understand.” It does not say, “that cannot be understood.” If the passage said, Paul wrote things that cannot be understood, then we would have a problem, but that is not what Peter wrote. Instead, he declared, “Yes, Paul has written some hard things before, and ignorant unstable people distort his teaching, like they do with the rest of Scripture to their own destruction.” In other words, the distortion of Scripture leads to destruction. We must be careful. We ought to work hard to understand it, not because it is obscure, but because it is worth our greatest efforts!

Are there depths and mysteries within the Bible? Yes. We are talking about the words of the infinite God spoke to a finite people. But just because there are deep spots in the pool doesn’t mean that no one is able to swim in it. As Gregory I noted about the Bible, “The Scripture is like a smooth and deep river in which a lamb could walk, and an elephant could swim.”

### **Conclusion**

- 1) We should be confident in God’s clear Word! God’s Word is clear about its own clarity.
- 2) We should not be surprised when people misunderstand or reject God’s clear Word!

- 3) We should be vigilant in our pursuit of holiness to not fall prey to Satan's schemes that attack our confidence in God's clear word. Our inclination to rebel against God is not for lack of understanding or clarity in God's Word. It is due to our desire to value our own words or the words of others over the Word of God.
  
- 4) We should rejoice and be grateful for grace of God in Jesus Christ which God's clear Word reveals to us. The apostle Paul quoted Deuteronomy 30:11-14 in Romans 10:5-9, which is a familiar passage to us. Paul wrote, "<sup>5</sup> Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: 'The person who does these things will live by them.'" <sup>6</sup> But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) <sup>7</sup> "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). <sup>8</sup> But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: <sup>9</sup> If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

On this passage, theologian John Frame wrote, "Here Paul finds in Deuteronomy 30 something more than the promise of blessing through obedience to the law. He notes that in that passage the presence of the law points to Christ. Moses' hearers had assumed that the Word could not be appropriated without great efforts. But the *nearness* of God's Word speaks of grace, not strenuous effort. In Christ, we do not need to ascend to heaven for he has by grace come down to us. And we don't need to go down to the grave, for Christ has by grace risen from the dead. The nearness of the Word, now, is the nearness of Christ himself in the Word of faith, Paul's gospel. We meet Christ in the gospel, and as we confess and believe him, we are saved." (Frame, 208)

What this means for us is that we do not have to wonder about the nearness of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ. We do not have to wonder if it takes great effort to be saved. No! We have wonderful, clear news! Understandable news! The greatest news that the world has ever heard! "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."