

Clarity of Scripture

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[0 : 00] Good to be together tonight and we're going to carry on in our series on scripture and this evening we're going to look at the clarity of scripture. So I'm going to begin with a prayer and then we'll read a short bit from the Bible and then we'll start.

Father we thank you for your goodness and grace to us and thank you for the opportunity to be together in fellowship this evening, a few moments in the middle of the week. And we ask that we would value this time in your company in this way and also in each other's company and that we would value the privilege of praying before the throne of grace, for the living God, for the maker of heaven and earth, for the creator and judge, for our Saviour. And we know that you love to hear our prayers, we know that they are important to you and we know that you work, choose, you condescend to work through the prayers of your people. And we ask that we would weigh that when we pray this evening and we pray that you would open our minds and our hearts this evening and be encouraged to think in our study of the Bible this evening and that Christ's presence would be with us in all that we do. So continue with us we pray and go before us in Jesus' name. Amen.

[1 : 43] Okay so I want to read a few verses just by way of introduction. I'm not going to preach from them. We're going to look at various verses this evening, these parts of the Bible as well, but I'm going to read from 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

1 Corinthians chapter 15 and I'm going to read the first 11 verses. Now it reminds you brothers of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and which you stand and by which you are being saved if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. But I delivered to you as a first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas then to the 12, then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James then to all the apostles. And last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I'm the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

[3 : 17] Whether then it was I or they, so we preached and so you believed. Okay, so we'll probably return at one point to that verse or to some verses in that section.

So this evening we're looking at the doctrine of the fact that the Bible is clear. So we've looked at the Bible as the word of God, also the word of men written by men.

We've looked at it as being inerrant, that is without error as originally given, says exactly what God intends it to say. And this evening we're looking at the Bible being clear.

The theological term for that in the books is the perspicuity of Scripture. It comes from perspicuatus, which is Latin for transparent, perspex is where we get the English word for something that's transparent, something that's self-evident, something that's clear.

And that's what we're going to look at in a little while this evening at the Bible being clear, evident and understandable.

[4 : 32] And we live in a day and an age where truth is in the postmodern age, something that can't be absolute and can't be known. So many people will argue that the Bible will just mean anything you want it to mean.

It can mean anything. Or they'll say, well, it doesn't make any sense anyway. And it's too difficult to understand and to grasp.

And so there's these conflicting philosophies about the Bible. And we stand against that believing, kind of following on from what's been said the last two studies, that because God is who He is and because He is God, then His word to us is clear and can be understood by anyone.

So we're going to look at a few reasons for that this evening, and then we'll spend some time in prayer. I think almost by introduction, we recognize that that is important because it dovetails with the character of God Himself.

And so we're going to be a perfect communicator. You know, as Corey said a couple of weeks ago that the Bible is inerrant because it says exactly what God intended it to say in its original autograph.

[5 : 58] And so we also recognize therefore if he says what he wanted to say, and he wanted to say something to us, it's going to be clear. It's obvious for us because he's God. And from the beginning, we know that God spoke. So God communicated. God revealed things that were hidden.

God made Himself known and God revealed truth. And because truth is truth, it's clear. It can be known. Christ Himself is the word, the communication, the revelation from God, enflashed, made clear.

And just as the Bible in the errant say, God says what he intended to say, in the word of Scripture, it's absolutely clear.

The Bible is absolutely clear to those to whom he intended to make it clear to, to those he intended to reveal Himself to. And God is never there to confuse people. He's there to reveal Himself to people.

We'll look at one or two different aspects of what that means and hopefully we'll be able to discuss it more together when you meet for study. But there's the character of God. So He's a revealing God. He's a simple God at that level in being who He is and in wanting to reveal Himself to His people.

[7 : 29] But you also have the evidence of the Bible itself, that it's a Bible that is meant for people and it's with a message that people are meant to hear. Ordinary, everyday people. Right from near the beginning of the Old Testament, we recognize what God says to His own people in Deuteronomy 6.5-9.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be in your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you are at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down, when you get up. Tie them as simple on your hands, bind them on your foreheads, write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates.

The message was clear. It was clear even to children. Children were able to understand it. It was everyday talk, the revelation of God. It was to be with families as they walked along the road. And it was clear and understandable for educated or those who are uneducated, right from the beginning. Psalm 19, verse 7. Does anyone know what that is? No. Okay. The law of the Lord is perfect.

[8 : 47] Refreshing the soul. Statues of the Lord are trustworthy. Making wise the simple. So that recognition that the Bible is clear enough to give wisdom to those who are simple, to those who maybe don't have strong intellects, or those who are regarded as being insignificant intellectually, or in any other way in society. And the law of God, the statues of God, the word of God are given for that.

Christ Himself, if you move to the New Testament, if you counted how many times Jesus in the New Testament said to his hearers, have you not read? Have you not read? Have you not read?

It was a constant refrain from Jesus to the people that he was speaking to, not just to the scribes and Pharisees, but to the people that were listening to his message, all the people.

The word of God was there in the Old Testament. It was something he expected them to. Jesus never said, oh, I know the Old Testament is so tremendously difficult. You couldn't possibly understand it without me making it clear. It's so confusing.

He never said anything like that. He always had the great, perfect assumption that the word was able to be understood, and the message of God that came from it was clear for people.

[10 : 10] The disciples who were old, they knew exactly the centrality and the significance of the message that they were bringing from God from his word through the revelation of the Old Testament and the person of Jesus Christ. And yet it was noted that they were ordinary, unschooled men, but that they had been with Jesus.

And that's the critical point, is that they had this truth. They weren't educated in any special way other than being in the company of Jesus, and yet they knew and understood the message that Jesus was bringing. It was clear. It was perspicuous. It was obvious for them to see. And then of course the epistles themselves, if you work through the whole Bible, weren't written to the academy. They weren't written to scholastic people. The epistles were written to churches, to ordinary people, with ordinary problems, with real problems, with deep problems. And the message that they brought, that the epistles brought, was clear for them to understand both for those who were in the academy and those who were scholastic, but also for the ordinary person in the street. So the Bible itself speaks clearly about the clarity of the message. But there's some caveats to that which we'll look at. And we'll do that by just looking briefly, or reading briefly, what the confession, a confessionalist, he says, is a fantastic paragraph, really clear, succinct, carefully worded and balanced.

[11 : 49] With regard to the clarity of Scripture, it says, all Scripture, Westminster Confession, chapter 1, section 7, all things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, not alike clear unto all, yet those things that are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or another, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. Beautifully put, do you appreciate them like that? That kind of language, isn't it?

It really says everything about the whole doctrine of the clarity of Scripture in that really tight paragraph. So there's one or two things I just want to point out from that that maybe makes more sense of this doctrine, which is important for us to recognise and understand because many people will rail against such a doctrine.

The first is that not all Scripture is equally clear. We recognise that from what it says in the statement, all Scripture, things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves.

Now that's common sense for us, isn't it? So it's a caveat to the clarity of Scripture that all things in Scripture are clear. There are technicalities, details, instructions, mysteries, descriptions that are not that clear. Not everything in Scripture is equally clear.

And we need to recognise that. We also need to recognise that there's places where Scripture has to be its own interpreter in order to make it more clear.

[13 : 42] A practical example was Corey on Sunday when he talked about the unclean passages.

Well, the passages aren't unclean, but the passages that describe the unclean rules in Leviticus, how you look at them, and it doesn't seem to make sense.

And it's only as you begin to understand more and more of what Christ came to do and how he went outside the camp and became unclean and recognised.

It wasn't just a, in other words, it wasn't just a hygiene issue that was being spoken about, but it was a sin issue, it was a death issue. And you know, Corey unpacked that because Scripture itself interprets Scripture on that point and we'll find that the New Testament brings light on many of the Old Testament truths because truth in the Bible is not flat.

It's a progressive revelation. So if all you had was the Old Testament, it would be very difficult to come to faith, but we've got the revelation of Jesus obviously, which brings light to the, some of the shadows of the Old Testament and make things clearer.

[14 : 55] And that clearly involves effort and study to recognise that so that some things are not that clear and some things need more effort to understand them.

And there's things that clearly the Bible makes clear itself. There's treasures in Scripture that you need to dig to to mine to find the truth and to understand the truth.

And there's treasures there that sometimes only time and maturity will reveal. Peter himself recognizes that with some of the teaching of Paul, when he says in second Peter three, bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote with you, wrote with the wisdom that God gave him.

He writes the same thing in all his letters, speaking to them in 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.

So even Peter would recognize that not all things are equally clear in Scripture. There are some difficult truths. And we need to bear that in mind and not have a an unduly simplistic understanding of Scripture.

[16:18] Not all things are equally clear. But as the Bible makes clear in the confession highlights all that is necessary for coming to know Christ and following him, I would add that to the confession, if I may, you don't mind me, adding to the confession.

But I think and when it says about salvation that would include not just coming to faith but being disabled, all that's necessary for coming to know Christian following him is clear.

And that's really what the clarity of Scripture focuses on. The scriptures main focus main theme, main direction is absolutely clear. The central redemptive historical theme of the Bible that at the center of that the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

And what it means for us is crystal clear that there's no variety of opinions, biblically about that truth, it's clear, you can change that truth, you can twist that truth, but it is absolutely clear and obvious what the meaning is.

The fruit of the Spirit and the listing of the fruit of the Spirit, the armor of God, kind of things we need to maintain our Christian faith and walk with God.

[17:45] The lists of the various sins of the flesh, they're crystal clear, there's no doubting them, we might not like them, and we recognize that many in society choose to reject what is clearly stated in Scripture, for example about sexuality.

It's clear, people may disagree with it, but it's absolutely obvious as we read Scripture, what are the sins of the flesh and what he requires of us in obedience.

We don't judge you in any doubt of what God requires of you in obedience. We fight it, we may still against it, we may stumble and fall into it, but none of us can be confused as to what God morally requires of us as believers in following him.

It's crystal clear, walking in the light as he is in the light, so all that is necessary for becoming a Christian and for staying in the shadow of Christ and walking in obedience to him is clear.

And it's wisdom, I would say, thirdly, breaking down what the Confession says, it's wisdom is available to the educated and to the uneducated.

[19:11] So the Confession was written in the context of the Reformation and of the concept that the Roman Catholic Church had of the Bible, which was basically the Roman Catholic leaders and priests and the church were the only people that could interpret Scripture rightly, both with authority and indeed in some cases with infallibility, the Magisterium.

The Bible was not for ordinary people. They would misunderstand it, they would misrepresent it and they would abuse it. Keep it in Latin, keep it away from the people, don't put it in the common tongue and let the church be the authority as to the Bible's interpretation. So the Bible was not given into the hands of the people and the people by and large remain hugely ignorant under the power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church of the time.

Luther was determined to put the Bible into the German language for the people. And so it's wisdom, and we know that from the Psalm that we read, the statutes of the Lord are there making wise as simple. There's hundreds of verses that would also speak in a similar vein.

And it's there for all people. I think it's important for us to remember and to consider and think about when we often maybe doubt the simplicity of the Bible to be understood in today's society for today's people.

As the confession makes clear, because it's based on the Bible's truths itself, God intends the use of ordinary means to help make the truth clearer.

[21:10] So the Bible can be understood, but he also gives us aids and helps to enable us to understand the truths of the Bible better.

And I think it's time for you to do a bit of work. What do you think are the ordinary means that God gives us to enable us to better understand the Bible?

The Bible itself, in our own language, presumably. That's a great help. Translators and those who spend time bringing the Bible to us.

The other ordinary means that he gives us to help us understand scripture. Do you think? Pastors, yes. Teachers and preachers, those are gifted that God speaks about.

In Timothy, where he speaks about the gifts of the church that he gives to the church among them, pastors and teachers. So that is also part of the ordinary means. There'll be a question. There's a question about that for the Bible study, which is a really good question, I think.

[22:27] There's two angles to either. Why do we need pastors? So you think about that. It's important not only to rely on pastors or not pastor, but preachers, teachers. So there's two different

extremes that you can go into there.

Anything else? Yes, the church is really important. So individual one-to-one Bible studies, Bible study groups, sharing experience of how the word is applied in your life and heart is also part of the ordinary means.

The church is important. Anything else? Sacraments, yes.

Visual means of symbolic and visual means of understanding the work of Jesus Christ.

There's one biggie that is probably so obvious you haven't thought of it. Yeah, the Holy Spirit and prayer. That's really vital in terms of what God gifts us to enable us to understand and make clear the scriptures.

[23 : 45] 1 Corinthians 2.14 is really important on this. The person without the spirit does not accept the things that come from the spirit of God, but considers them foolishness.

Can't understand them because they are discerned only through the spirit. So there's a recognition there that an intelligent atheist will understand.

The Bible will be clear to them in the sense of knowledge and intellectual knowledge, but they will not understand it with a view to the life of faith and following Christ.

So there's a difference between intellectual understanding of the Bible and between true understanding of the Bible and the clarity that comes from that true understanding.

So the Holy Spirit and prayer are vital for us to understand the Bible, which is a really significant point because very often we read the Bible without prayer and without the Holy Spirit.

[24 : 47] And sometimes that's because we think, well, I better do this kind of superstitious, I better read my Bible today. And I wonder what I can learn today, but maybe not thinking about that. In other words, there's a really strong relational element to the clarity of scripture.

It's clear as we entrust ourselves to the God of scripture, and as we seek to learn, worship, grow and obey what we're reading when we are in scripture.

So the Holy Spirit and prayer is important because it's a living word. That's really significant because the clarity doesn't simply come from it being easy to understand.

The clarity comes from recognizing who gives us the word and the type of understanding we need. It's not primarily intellectual, although that can be a great gift and a great benefit to the church and to the individual.

So the Holy Spirit and prayer is the most important. So when you read your Bible in the morning, if you're not reading it with prayer and with our dependence on the Holy Spirit, you may as well read the Bino.

[26 : 06] In fact, it probably would be better fun. But the Holy Spirit and prayer is vital for us to understand and get the meaning of scripture and what God intends it to teach us.

Because how often have we gone to scripture and read it and then immediately gone and sinned the sin that is exposed in the passage we read? Because we didn't read it with a view to obedience and trust. So Holy Spirit and prayer, you mentioned teachers, preachers, academics, those who study the Bible full time, books, podcasts that help us to understand the tradition of the church, tradition with a capital T as opposed to traditionalism.

And I'll give you the old adage for that. My favorite one, tradition is the living faith of the dead.

Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. It's an important distinction, important recognition.

So it's that whole thing about learning from people who themselves know a lot and have learned a lot about the Bible. And one of the things that's important to learn, I think, from teachers and preachers and academics is how to interpret the Bible and how to interpret it well and how to interpret it accurately.

So it's that whole thing that, oh, another adage, you know, give a man a fish, feed him for a day, teach a man a fish, feed him for a lifetime. So if you are learning from those who understand the scripture well and follow scripture well, then you're learning yourself how to interpret scripture in a way that is effective and accurate.

[27 : 58] So I think as well when, and again this comes up in I think in the study, preaching and teaching very easy to be passive under it and simply to be consumerist or to receive all the time.

I think it's important not to be passive under the preaching and teaching, but to be spiritually active and learning and growing rather than simply marking out a 10 or consuming, which is a temptation for us or even to tick a box.

Translators, we mentioned them having the Bible in your own language. And the other ordinary means is time and effort.

That's a really significant part of understanding the scripture daily being under the words, under the word, the Brian Jews Act 1711, more noble character than those in Thessalonica for they received the message with great eagerness, examine the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

And that's just a kind of broader picture there of the importance of daily examining God's word. And there's lots of different verbs in the Bible that speak about digging or learning or growing or examining or meditating that speak of not a perfunctory, shallow passing through of scripture, but being engaged when you find bits that you don't understand, not just, well, I don't understand that and throwing that away and saying, oh, who knows, what does that mean?

[29 : 43] But actually stopping and saying, well, what does that mean? Who can tell me what that means? Where can I find out what that means? And how does it fit in with the rest of scripture, asking intelligent questions, wanting to learn wanting to grow, you know, is that whole picture again of digging deep to get the precious truth that is contained.

It's not always simple. It can become clear as we spend time and as we spend effort, you know that yourself, in anything, in anything that we do.

But something that you start a hobby and you bite maintenance and you start and you have not a clue how the bite works and what's going to happen. We'll never be able to do this. But as you take time, as you learn, as you work with it, things that were initially really difficult become quite clear and you see the significance of them and why they work in a certain way when you do things in a certain way.

I know nothing about bite maintenance, as you can tell. But you know, it's the same with the Bible. Things that I'm sure that you'll all see that there's things that you thought you couldn't understand 10 years ago.

But you've worked through it and you've you've studied and you've wrestled with it. Now it's clear. It's not that it was unclear. It was objectively intrinsically, but it was unclear because we couldn't see. And so it becomes clear as we study. So it takes time and effort. That's hugely significant in terms of the ordinary means.

[31 : 18] So just before we finish then, couple of questions, which I'm not going to answer really, but I'm hoping you'll probably answer them if you get to study it. Well, I'll kind of hint at some answers. Why does it seem so unclear to so many people, or maybe to you?

And in some part we've answered some of these, it can be a lack of faith. So there can be, there can be intellectual understanding, but no trusting in the Lord and no no presupposition that God is good and that God is telling us something that is good for us and will redeem us.

And that dovetails with just a hardness of heart, but you're not really interested in learning. You're, you're rejecting his simple truth. And so it doesn't push you to study and learn more about his, what appears complex truth.

And sometimes there is, as we said, complex truth. And there's no sense of the Holy asking for the Holy Spirit's help when we learn. So when you easily say that I've got no, I just don't know what that means. Don't know what Isaiah means. Don't know what the Psalms mean there.

Don't understand these things about war and death and killings. Look into it, study it, work through it. Some things will not become clear. Some things are not easy, but many things will you will find their place.

[32 : 57] If it is so clear, another common question from people will be why there's so many disagreements. If the Bible is clear, why are people so, why are Christians so divided on so many things in the Bible if it's clear, baptism is clear.

Why aren't people all thinking the same thing? If the Church government isn't clear, what is clear, why is there so different, many different forms of church government and so on.

It's a good question. I'm not sure entirely what the answer is to that. One thing we can say is that, is it unclear? Or is it our interpretations that are faulty?

Is it our methodology? Is it our understanding of scripture? Is it our culture, our background?

There's many different reasons why we might think differently on certain truths.

And most of these truths that people have different opinions on in the church are secondary issues. And not as the Bible makes clear and as the confession makes clear matters regarding salvation and obedience to Christ and following Him.

[34 : 17] There's pride, there's division, there's presuppositions, there's traditions. One day, a good bit in heaven is one day we'll find out.

It'll be absolutely clear what God's position was on these things. But we'll be humble about it when we realize that we were right.

No, I'm only joking. But there is ultimately only one truth, isn't there? But I believe, and I'm not saying this is theologically correct, so you may want to argue with this.

But I think God condescends to expect unity, even in the diversity of understanding of these secondary issues.

He allows for it. And it's not that important at that level. But He does expect unity because that's much clearer from scripture.

[35 : 16] There's no doubt about that. If we are clear on the essence and the truth and the fundamentals of the gospel, we are called to unity. I don't mean institutional unity.

I just mean biblical unity with those who think differently from us. And we're not to be partisan and we're not to be parochial and we're not to be insular. We're to have that recognition.

I believe that God condescends to allow us to be different because we are different. And we mustn't forget in conclusion that there's amazing agreement on the fundamentals, which speaks into this doctrine of the perspicuity of scripture, the clarity of scripture.

You can meet with Christians from all over the world and so quickly you can recognize that you're one with them on the fundamentals. And there's a brotherhood and a sisterhood with them, a clarity on these basics.

Some different generations pick up a book from three, four centuries ago and the basics, the fundamentals and the truths are the same because the clarity of scripture is absolutely unquestionable.

[36 : 30] So it's important to remember that as well. So there you go. Just a quick run through one or two truths about the clarity of scripture.

There's four or five questions for the Bible story of a week tonight. Does anyone get any questions on that topic? That I completely missed or an area that I missed or I didn't speak about.

No. Yes, no, no. It's important though. It's important not to be simplistic.

And to understand what it means that the Bible is clear and to understand that some things need mind before they can be understood. They're not unclear.

You just need to learn to understand what God is saying through his word. And that requires effort and energy.