

God's Word Is Understandable

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning again. Let's see, can we hear me? Good morning again. My name is Tommy. For those of you who I didn't get a chance to say hello to before the service, hopefully we'll get a chance to meet after the service. We are in a series, we're in week two of a series that we started last week called Read, Mark, Learn. We're looking at essentially the doctrine of Scripture. We're asking what should we believe about this book, about the Bible? How should we think about it? What role does it play in the life of God's people?

What are the things that are important to believe about it? And really what we're asking is, what does the Bible teach about itself? Doctrine of Scripture. And so last week we looked a little bit at the kind of relationship that is possible with God's Word. And this week we're going to take a little bit of a different focus. Before we get too far into this series, it's probably important for us to ask, is it possible to know what the Bible teaches about itself? Or to put it another way, is it possible for us to really know anything at all with any degree of certainty? Is it possible to understand Scripture in ways that are reliable, right? Over the years I've had many conversations with people, I've had many conversations with people where we are discussing some issue of doctrine, and I begin to try and demonstrate where a certain doctrine comes from in

Scripture, and the person responds, well, that's just your interpretation. And the assumption behind that kind of response is that we all have our own way of interpreting the Bible, but there's really no one right way, and there's no way to know if there is a right way. And, you know, that's one of the many ways that postmodern ideas have influenced the church, just as they've influenced us and really every corner of society. One of the things that came with postmodernism was an undercutting of our epistemology, an undercutting of the idea that it's possible to know anything really. And so there's a lack of confidence in our ability to know things, that just sort of something that we've been raised with, and anyone who therefore comes forward with any degree of certainty in their claims is seen as either arrogant or naive, right? Now, that's one extreme. It's not possible to know anything. That's postmodernism. But there is another extreme, and I'm inclined to think that probably there are some people who flee from one extreme to the other, right? The other extreme is the kind of fundamentalist

Christian culture that some of you grew up in that says not only is it possible to know exactly what this means in the Bible, but this is the only way to think about it, right? There's a right, and we have it, and everybody else is wrong, this kind of wooden, literalist approach to Scripture that is highly rigid and doesn't create space to explore or question or certainly to disagree. So, what we're wanting to do is to ask, is it possible to avoid these extremes? Is it possible to understand Scripture and to draw out its meaning with enough confidence that we can live it out, that we can build our lives on it? That's what we're asking this morning. And we're going to be looking at 2 Peter chapter 3 verses 14 to 18, Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 through 9. We're going to be asking three questions.

One, does it matter if we can interpret Scripture? Does it matter? Number two, is it possible? And then number three, if it is possible, how do we do it well? Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that it is something that we're not left to our own to make sense of, but we're thankful that You are present with us. You don't just promise to be a God who writes us a letter and leaves. You promise to be a God who is present with us and a God who speaks to us, who dwells in our midst. And so, we pray that even as we attempt to understand Your Word, that Yours would be the voice that helps us interpret it faithfully, Lord. We pray this for all of our good and edification, and ultimately that You would be glorified through us. We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.

[4 : 33] Amen. So, the first question we want to ask is, does it matter if we can interpret Scripture reliably? Now, this is going to be a quick point, but I think that it's a point worth making, because a lot of people might be tempted to say, well, I don't really... I mean, who cares if I can really understand the Bible? Who really cares about that? I don't really need the Bible because I have a relationship with Jesus. I go straight to the source. And there are some people who say, you know, I hear from God directly. I don't really need the Bible to screw that up.

The assumption being that somehow hearing from God through Scripture is a sort of secondary way of doing it. And so, in the face of these questions, we look at 2 Peter. 2 Peter is written out of concern for all of this false teaching and misinformation that is circulating in the church.

And here at the very end, chapter 3, the final paragraph of 2 Peter, he's warning about people who will intentionally misinterpret Scripture to suit their own needs or their own agenda.

It says in verses 17 and 18, you, therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, knowing that all of this misinformation is going to be happening, all the false teachers are going to be saying their things, take care that you're not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. Verse 18, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

So, in other words, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus requires two things. It requires that we, number one, avoid false teachings of Scripture, and number two, hold to accurate interpretations of Scripture. The implication here is that the only way I can grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus is by correctly understanding and interpreting Scripture. It's necessary for that.

[6 : 32] This is why when we look at the writings of the various apostles, like Paul or Peter or the author of Hebrews, they all talk about the need to move from milk to solid food. Milk refers to the basic, most elementary teachings of Scripture. Solid food refers to the deeper, more complex teachings of Scripture that require a certain amount of maturity in order to apprehend, right? So, we need to move from immaturity, only understanding certain things in Scripture, to the solid food of understanding the deeper truths of Scripture.

They're tying Christian maturity to our understanding and interpretation of Scripture. Jesus Himself actually says in John chapter 8 verse 31, if you abide in My Word, which is a shorthand way of saying My entire body of teaching, you are truly My disciples. So, He's saying being a true disciple of Mine means abiding in My Word. You can't abide in something unless you understand it, right? So, in answer to this first question, yes, it does matter if we understand Scripture, if we can interpret it reliably. It's actually very important. So, now to the question that really is the meat of this sermon, is it possible to understand Scripture? And the answer, as you can probably surmise, is yes, but with a caveat, okay?

So, I'll give you the yes, and then I'll give you the caveat. Yes, it's absolutely possible to understand and interpret Scripture in reliable ways. If we go back to the Old Testament, to the place where Scripture first starts to be written down by Moses, we read in Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 6, these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk about them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise. Not only are adults commanded to discuss Scripture in an ongoing way as they're going about their daily life, but they are specifically commanded to teach these things to their children. How many people have ever tried to teach children anything, right? If you've ever tried to teach children anything, you know that you need to be able to distill things down into very plain ways that are easy to grasp, especially if you're dealing with younger children who are not developmentally capable of abstract reasoning. You have to be able to distill it down into simple, concrete terms. The ability to teach these things to children assumes that we can not only reliably interpret them, but that we can distill them and present them in ways that even children can understand, right? That the implication is that we should be able to do this faithfully.

Now, you may say, okay, well, that's Deuteronomy, that's the Old Testament. What about the New Testament? That doesn't apply to the New Testament, does it? And this is where this passage in 2 Peter 3 is very helpful. Notice that in this reading, he refers to the letters of Paul as Scripture. It's easy to overlook this and not recognize how significant this is, but he's in the midst of talking about how some people twist Paul's words, and he says some people will twist Paul's words as they do the other Scriptures. And that word that is translated Scriptures is the word *graphi*, and that word is only ever used in the New Testament to refer to writing that is not only authoritative, but canonical. It's used to refer to writing that has been set apart as canonical, meaning it is the body of writings that we believe come directly from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And so, Peter clearly groups Paul's letters, which are already in circulation, in with the other body of canonical writing. So, he's saying, number one, Paul's letters have the same status as the Old Testament canon. And he's saying, number two, we should be able to understand Paul's letters just like we do the Old Testament canon. So, you say, okay, well, that applies to the New Testament. Then we look at what Jesus teaches. Jesus also affirms that we should be able to understand Scripture. This is a great point that I first came across from Wayne Grudem. He makes this point. He says, you know, Jesus, whether in His teachings or His conversations or His disputes, and He had a lot of those, right? Jesus had a lot of conversations and a lot of disputes and a lot of disagreements with people. He never says, right? He never once blames the

Old Testament for being unclear, right? He's dealing with people who were living in the first century. That means they're living one to two thousand years after these texts were written in the Old Testament. And yet, when He's debating people about the Old Testament, He never blames the Old Testament for being unclear. He always operates with the assumption that people should be able to read and understand it. And in fact, when people do misunderstand Scripture or when they misapply Scripture, Jesus never says, oh, man, you're right, my bad, that really was unclear. You know, we really should have said that differently. I'm really sorry about that. He never says that. Instead, it doesn't matter if He's speaking to learned scholars and teachers of the law, scribes and Pharisees, or if He's teaching or speaking to untrained common folk, no matter who He's talking to, He always responds the same way. He always assumes that the blame for misunderstanding any teaching of

[12 : 35] Scripture is not to be placed on Scripture. It's meant to be placed on those who either misunderstand or fail to accept what is written. So, again and again, when people ask Him questions, He says things like, have you not read what David did? Have you not read in the law? Have you never read in the Scriptures? Have you not read what was said to you by God? Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? In Matthew 22, He says, you are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. So, again and again and again, Jesus says the blame lies, the responsibility lies with the people who are misinterpreting or failing to accept what has been written. So, clearly, Jesus holds us responsible for reading and interpreting the Scriptures faithfully, even if they were written a long time ago. That's the yes. Here's the caveat. Yes, it is possible to understand Scripture, but it is not always easy. It's not possible to understand it all at once. It's not possible to understand it easily or in an instant. There are a lot of parts of Scripture that take a whole lot of time and effort and even more help to be able to understand. And that's why I love this passage in 2 Peter.

He's in verse 16, he's talking about the letters of the Apostle Paul, and he says this wonderful phrase, there are some things in them that are hard to understand, right? So, Jesus never blames the text for being impossible to understand. He never says this is... nobody could understand this. But there is this acknowledgement from Peter that sometimes things are hard to understand. He's not saying it's impossible, he's saying it can be hard. So, some parts of Scripture require a lot more time and effort to understand them properly. I don't know about you, but I draw tremendous comfort from that little sentence. Tremendous comfort, right? There's a lot of grace in that. I remember a few years ago, I preached a series, our team preached a series through the book of Revelation.

We did the whole thing. And, you know, there were moments when I had to say, you know, this is my best guess as to what this means, right? This is... if you've ever looked at Daniel, if you've ever looked at Revelation, if you've ever looked at some of the visions and parts of Ezekiel, if you've ever looked at, you know, the Song of Songs, I did a series in the Song of Songs, highest attendance ever in the church. Just kidding. I'm kidding, but that actually might be true. There's a lot of things that we think Song of Songs is about, right? And, you know, but we're not sure always exactly what's being said, right? So, it can be very hard, and it can sometimes take a lot of time. Thankfully, the parts of Scripture that are the most clear are also the most foundational for our faith, right? We see in 2 Timothy 3.16, all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

And that's a very important word. Everything we need to know in order to have a relationship with Jesus, to follow Him faithfully, and to grow into fully formed men and women of God is clearly laid out. We've been given everything that we need to become complete in Christ. And because of this, because of the acknowledgement that there are some things that are clear and easier to understand, and other things require more effort, there are some doctrines that we treat as essentials, right? We treat certain doctrines as essentials. God's creation of all things, the problem of sin and human rebellion, the sacrifice of Jesus to atone for sin, the resurrection, right? Paul says, if without the resurrection, the whole faith is in vain. It's pretty clear that that's important.

The final judgment, the new creation, these are so clear and central that they're really not up for debate because what we believe about these things directly impacts whether or not we can have a relationship with God. So, these are the essentials of the Christian faith. Now, there are other doctrines that are very important. They're very important. They shape our lives as Christians, but there is room for Christians to faithfully disagree over because it is possible to interpret Scripture in different ways, right? So, there are certain questions that we debate among faithful Christians, whether or not to baptize infants, the mode of baptism, sprinkle, pour, or immersion, how many offices in the church?

[17 : 22] Do we have priests and deacons or bishops, priests, and deacons, right? These are issues that Christians have disagreed over for a very long time. I have my personal convictions about these things, and they're fairly strong convictions, but I'm open to the fact that I will meet Jesus one day and realize I was wrong on them, and therefore, I'm going to show charity to my Christian brothers and sisters who disagree with me over these issues, right? It's because we recognize that there are some things in Scripture that are hard to understand, okay? So, yes, it's possible, but there is a caveat. It's not always easy.

If we want to go about interpreting Scripture and doing it faithfully, how do we do it well? Now, we could spend a whole lot of time on this. We don't have all the time in the world on this. There's lots of resources available for learning how to interpret Scripture faithfully, and over the course of this series, we're going to be sending out some resources for people who want to dig deeper into that, but let me just give you a few things from these texts to get us started in interpreting Scripture well. How do we do it well? Let me just give you four things. Number one, always interpret Scripture using all of the tools available to you. Okay, number one, you need a Bible that is written in your language, a language that you can understand, and you may want to compare several different translations. Now, I recognize this is more teaching than preaching, and this whole series is going to be like this, but what we're doing now is to try to equip you, okay? So, there's a spectrum of translations that are available. Most of us are native English speakers. There's a spectrum of translations that are available to you, and really now this is true for many languages.

On one end of the spectrum is what we call the formal equivalence, and on the other end is the dynamic equivalence, right? So, the formal equivalent translation is the translation that is a direct word-for-word maintaining the words and the structure of the original language as closely and accurately as possible. They're highly accurate, but sometimes the direct transfer from Hebrew or Greek to English, it can lose a little of the clarity. So, you have a lot of accuracy, but it can be harder to understand because it doesn't always work to go from one language to another language.

But something like the New American Standard Bible would fall on that end of the spectrum, right? I think Young's literal translation would fall on this end of the spectrum. On the other end of this continuum, we have the dynamic equivalent approach, which is a translator who takes the meaning of the original text, and they come up with an equivalent English way of saying it that preserves the meaning, but it's much more accessible to a native English speaker, right? Now, that does require more interpretive work, right? There's a certain amount of interpretation that is required to do that, and that's why some people don't like the dynamic equivalent as much.

They want the much more accurate, but what it does is it makes it much more immediately accessible to those of us who are trying to understand what is being said. So, there are lots of examples of this. The New Living Translation would be a good example of this. Even further over, I wouldn't actually count this as a translation, but you would have something like Eugene Peterson's The Message, right? Which is not so much a translation as it is a kind of paraphrase of Scripture. I like to call it the message because there's a fair amount of... there's a fair amount of interpretive work that goes into that, right? But very helpful. So, what I would recommend you do is to find a kind of go-to text that you like. I prefer the English Standard Version because it's somewhere in the middle between dynamic and formal. I prefer that, but I always consult multiple translations.

[21 : 07] And so, you can go to BibleGateway.com, and you can look up whatever passage you're reading, and you can immediately compare different translations. So, look at a literal translation, look at a dynamic translation, look at something in the middle, look at the message. That's going to give you much deeper insight into the meaning of the text, okay? So, some resources. Also, use study Bibles. Use commentaries. I've been teaching the Bible for over 15 years. I still love a good study Bible. You never outgrow the need for study Bibles. And I would say the English Standard Version study Bible is among the finest resources available. So, get your hands on that. It's about this thick.

It's just packed. It's like a commentary. It's like a single-volume commentary. It's fantastic. And so, that's available. There's also a wide variety of commentaries that you can use, people that have devoted their lives to understanding and interpreting Scripture.

You can go to the website, bestcommentaries.com, and that's like a rotten tomatoes for commentaries. And you can just... These are insider secrets here that I'm letting you in on.

And go to bestcommentaries.com, and lots of commentaries reviewed there, and you can figure out what you might want to get there. And then thirdly, listen to Bible teachers and preachers. You know, this is one of the reasons we have pastors. This is one of the reasons we have church leaders, that the idea is to set a few people apart, to devote the majority of their time and energy to studying and trying to understand Scripture because of what we said earlier, because it's hard, because it takes a lot of time and knowledge, not only of the language, but of the culture and the history and the interpretive tradition. So, that's what Bible teachers and preachers are here for, is to help the church grow in their understanding of Scripture. So, that's the first thing. Number two, how do we do it well? Not only do we want to use the resources available to us, number two, interpret Scripture with a posture of submission, with a posture of submission. Peter calls people who deliberately twist the meaning of Scripture lawless, lawless people. What that means is these are people who are not in submission to Christ as Lord. And so, one of the symptoms of that is that they readily take Scripture out of context and reinterpret it to fit their own agenda. Posture matters a great deal. You can use Scripture to justify just about anything you want. We've seen that throughout history, right? When those in power, people wanted to justify their crusades, they found Bible teachers who came along and twisted

Scripture to justify their crusades. A couple hundred years ago, when the Europeans wanted to justify the slave trade, they found Bible teachers who came along and were willing to twist Scripture in order to justify the slave trade. Whenever people come along and they discover new ways of interpreting Scripture that just happen to line up with the current cultural agenda that those in power are wanting to push, always be suspicious. As my kids like to say, that's sus. So, always ask lots and lots of questions whenever a new interpretation arises, and it just happens to align. If it's wildly unpopular, okay, maybe.

[24 : 31] But that's not often the case, right? The Anglican Catechism actually says in question 33...well, actually, I'll get to that. I'll get to the Catechism in a second. A faithful interpretation of Scripture always requires us to humble ourselves. And what that means is instead of submitting the Scripture to us, we are called to submit ourselves to Scripture. So, before you even open it up, you know, I will often just say a quick prayer of submission to the Lord before I even open it up, just so I know that as my eyes fall on this text, I'm doing it from below, right, and not from above, looking down, putting it on a table to be dissected. I'm submitting myself to it, right?

Number three, how do we do this well? Not only do we use the tools available and approach it with a posture of submission, but number three, always interpret Scripture in community with other believers, in community. Man, I'm deeply grateful that the Bible has been translated into so many languages. It's one of the great gifts of the Protestant Reformation. But as with anything, that comes with a cost. It comes with a risk, right? Because it makes it possible for people to read and study the Bible in total isolation with no help from other Christians. And all of that leads to a lot of very bad interpretations. There are a lot of cults and offshoots of Christianity, heretical offshoots that started with one, usually man, sitting, but not always, sitting in a room by themselves, reading the Bible and interpreting it in their own way and thinking, you know what, I should start a movement based on this, right? It seldom goes well for us if that's our only time we ever read and interpret the Bible is in isolation. So, Peter, like all of the New

Testament writers, assumes that his letters are going to be read and studied by the community of believers, right? By the whole community. Not just one person who has the anointing, but the whole community of believers, right? And so, you know, the community of Christians in the Old Church regularly met together to hear and study the Scripture together. And so, most of the New Testament epistles are not written to one leader. They're written to the whole church. And the assumption is that the person delivering the letter would come in and they would, in front of the whole community, they would read it to the whole community. So, everybody would hear the same thing.

So, it's very important for us to do it in community. Scripture is meant to be read, interpreted, and applied in community with other believers. Of course, there are some people with training or spiritual gifts that make them more effective at interpreting and teaching Scripture, but their role is to help the whole community become better at that. We're all meant to be interpreters and teachers of Scripture at some level. And we all need help from other Christians in our study of Scripture. So, it's important to say, you know, when I preach a sermon or when Jeff preaches a sermon, even though I'm standing up here alone and even though I'm the only one you see, this is not just my interpretation of Scripture, right? This is a distillation, right? What you're hearing is a distillation of tons of input. This is a distillation that comes from the people around me, like our clergy, like our staff, like my friends, like my wife. I never preach a sermon without talking through the passage with the people around me at some point. That's always a part of the preparation. Also, numerous Bible commentators, theologians, philosophers, historians.

Also, the great tradition of interpretation handed down through history. The Anglican tradition, the Reformers, what we call the great tradition of the first millennium, the early church fathers, all have offered input into how we interpret various passages of Scripture. So, now we can talk about the Anglican Catechism. The Anglican Catechism says in question 33, because Holy Scripture was given by God to the church, right? Not to certain leaders, but to the church, it should always be understood in ways that are faithful to its own plain meaning, to its entire teaching, and to the church's historic interpretation. So, we stand within a very broad and deep tradition. So, we may stand up here by ourselves, but we stand here, I stand here as a representative of a vast community of believers throughout time in history who are too numerous to even count, right? It's very important to recognize that. Number four, the last thing I'll say, how do we do this well? We always use the tools available to us, approach it with a posture of humility, always do it in community. Then number four, seek to interpret Scripture with the help of the Holy Spirit, the help of the Holy Spirit. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2, 14, the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. He's very clearly saying, we cannot simply open this book and expect to interpret everything faithfully because the natural person, which means the person who is not aided by the Holy

[30 : 04] Spirit, who is not in communion with the Lord, is not going to be able to do that. He's saying it right off the bat, so don't even try. You need the help of the Holy Spirit to read and interpret this accurately, right? That's why the Psalms are filled with prayers for understanding. Psalm 119, verse 18, open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. Verse 27, make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works. There's a recognition right there.

I need God to help me read this faithfully and to obey it. So, the good news for us, as we consider all of this, is that Jesus promises help for those of us who want to understand and follow His Word. It's part of what it means to be in relationship with Jesus. In John 14, He says, the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. That's the good news for those of us who know and follow Jesus, is that we don't ever have to do this alone. All we have to do is ask, and Jesus will give us the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit's job, one of the things the Holy Spirit does in the church, is to help men and women open this and interpret it faithfully in ways that enable us to follow Jesus with all of our hearts. In light of that, I want to invite you to join me in praying this collect that we've been praying each week at the end of the sermon during this series. So, I'd love to put that on the screen if we could, Josh, and then we're going to pray this together. I'm going to invite you actually to stand. Sometimes standing is actually a posture of prayer, and then immediately after this, Dan's going to lead us in the creed. But let's pray this together. Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.