

The Bible is Clear

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[0 : 00] and great to be with you in church this morning. My name's Steve. I've not met you before, senior pastor here at St Paul's. We are, as Asha said, we're in a series on the Bible. It's good to be with you specifically in church.

Last week, I wasn't with the staff team. We were away on retreat. I'm in Bathurst, and you saw me preaching on the screen. I just want to clear out one thing. If you were here last week, you would have seen fireworks.

The fireworks were unplanned. We don't know where they came from. Nick and I have got no idea what happened with that moment, but take it as an act of God.

And so if you've not listened to that sermon yet, you might want to go back and do that now. So let me pray as we launch in to this morning that there would be genuine fireworks in the heart.

Gracious God, we are grateful for you. We are grateful for you, the one who is the instigator of all things, the one who created all things by the power of your word.

[1 : 05] You speak and things happen. We are grateful that you, the almighty, the everlasting, the one who never had a beginning, never has an end, you have spoken, and you have spoken with clarity so that we are not left without a knowledge of your will, understanding of who we are, who you are, and the way to salvation.

We are grateful to you, God, and I pray that your word will be clear to each of us as we explore it this morning, but as we explore it ourselves individually in relationship with you. Amen.

Now there's an ancient parable that's found in both Hindu and Buddhist texts. It is known as the parable of the blind man and the elephant. A group of blind men heard that a strange animal called an elephant had been brought to town and they found it and they were feeling around to work out what is this strange animal.

The first person grabbed hold of the trunk and said, well, it's actually clearly a big, thick snake.

Another one grabs hold of the ear, thought it seemed like some kind of fan. Another blind man had his arms wrapped around the leg and said, elephants are like tree trunks.

The blind man who placed his hand on the side of the elephant said, no, no, it's a great wall.

Another who felt its tail says, no, it's actually a rope is what it is.

[2 : 30] The point of the parable, it's an ancient parable, the point of it is that all people are blamed when it comes to the things of the divine, when it comes to God.

We know, we might know part of him, but we don't really know all of God. We don't know all of the divine and we can only ever know a little bit.

And so the conclusion is, for all of humanity, must tread carefully when discussing anything to do with God. and basically a whole great deal of humility.

So you don't call anything truth, you just have perceptions, is all you have. Now there are two major problems with the parable. Two major problems.

Firstly, the whole parable is told from the standpoint of someone who says that they can see the entire elephant.

[3 : 27] That's the first problem with it. While the parable is making the point that no one has the whole picture, the narrator himself clearly sees the whole picture and says, therefore no one has ultimate truth.

The second problem is somewhat more serious. While the parable is perfectly good description of human inability in matters of the divine, it doesn't consider a paradigm shattering question.

What if the elephant speaks? What if the elephant speaks? What if the elephant could talk? What if he was to tell the blind man exactly who he is or what he is?

Tell them who they are in fact because they can't see the world. Tell them what the world is like. Would the blind man in that moment be considered humble by ignoring the elephant who says, trees have got trunks and they are green with leaves?

Would they be considered humble to ignore the elephant at that point? And so today we're looking at another attribute of the word of God, namely the clarity of scripture.

[4 : 51] this is the doctrine of the clarity of scripture is primarily about God's character. Is God wise enough to make himself known?

Is he good enough to make himself accessible? Is he gracious enough to communicate in ways that are understandable to the meek and the lowly and the broken?

Or does God give us commands that we cannot understand and a self-revelation that reveals more questions than answers about life?

This is primarily about the character of God and who he is. So this is the third attribute of the Bible that we're looking at this morning. God's word is clear.

So I've got three points I'm running through this morning. Clearing up clarity, the Bible's clarity and the Bible's difficult clarity. So clearing up clarity. The clarity of scripture historically this doctrine has been known as the perspicuity of scripture which isn't a very clear word to mean clarity.

[6 : 07] But this is how the Westminster Confession of Faith describes the clarity of scripture. All things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves nor alike clear unto all and yet those things which are necessary to be known believed and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and open in some place of scripture or another that not only learned but the unlearned in a Jew's set use of the ordinary means may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Which basically means that last section is that it's accessible to everyone if you use the normal means of reading. That's basically what that means. Now there's a few nuances there which are really helpful.

So let me just quickly hit you with the nuances. Firstly, some bits of the Bible are clearer than others. Not every verse or every section has a simple or an obvious meaning.

Secondly, the main things that we need to know, we need to believe and we need to do are clearly seen in scripture. Thirdly, though the essential doctrines of Christianity are not equally clear in every passage of the Bible, they are all made clear somewhere in the Bible.

Fourthly, that which is necessary for salvation can be understood by even the uneducated. Lastly, the most important point in the Bible may not be understood perfectly but they can be understood sufficiently.

[7 : 51] That's the nuances that are in there in the Westminster Confession. So the best way forward for us is to just jump into the second point and have a look at one passage in the Bible, the one that Anne just read out, which talks about the clarity of scripture and the simplicity of scripture.

So let's jump into that one, the book of Deuteronomy. So we're into Deuteronomy 30, if you want to open your Bible. In fact, I'd encourage you to open your Bible at this point, Deuteronomy 30. The book of Deuteronomy records the second giving of the law of God, just as the Israelites are there on the brink of entering the promised land.

So let me just work our way backwards in Deuteronomy just to give us a little bit of clarity of what's going on here. In chapter 34 records the death of Moses.

Chapter 33, the final blessing of Moses. Chapter 32, the song of Moses before the blessing.

chapter 31, the selection of Joshua to take over from Moses when he dies. And chapters 1 to 30 is basically just one really long sermon.

[9 : 09] Don't ever complain about mine. Just one really long sermon or a bunch of sermons. Let's have a five minute break, stand up, sit down, and then we can jump back in the next one.

That's a really long sermon. And it's a covenant renewal ceremony spoken by God through the mouth of his servant Moses. So chapters 29 and 30 is the climax.

It's the conclusion of Moses' sermon. And more specifically, chapter 30 verses 11 to 20 is the final appeal.

It's the landing point, the appeal. Moses is imploring the people to choose life, not death, choose life.

And choose life by keeping the commandments and the statutes of the law. That's verses 15 to 20. And right there in 15 to 20 of chapter 30 is the entire point that Moses has been working towards in the previous 30 chapters.

[10:19] verses 15 is the key. I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him and to keep his commands, decrees and laws, and then you will live and increase and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

promise. It's a call really to commitment, it's a call to covenant renewal. It's a deeply personal and whole of life transforming relationship is what Moses is calling Israel to at this point.

And it's a very basic and straightforward appeal, very simple. and just before he issues this final appeal, he makes it clear to them that the appeal itself and all that's required of them is not beyond them.

Verse 11 to 14, just read out to us by Anne, makes it clear that God's word, all of his statutes, all of his commands is not beyond them and therefore life itself is not beyond them, not out of their reach. Moses says it's really clear, you don't have to go up to heaven to get God's word, God's word is not out of reach, you don't need to get in a spaceship and launch up to the Netherlands to try and find answers.

[12:02] Verse 13, 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 that we may obey it.

In the Bible, the sea is a symbol of chaos and destruction. In fact, Paul quotes this verse in Romans chapter 10 and he calls it the abyss.

Revelation 9 calls it the abyss. It's the place of destruction, of death, of torment. In ancient times, the sea represented death and destruction.

Death was sinking into the abyss. And the great stories of ancient cultures were the stories of adventures taking on the seas to discover new worlds and explore uncharted lands.

What Moses is saying here with these images is we do not relate to God like that. It's not that hard. We don't have to search the heavens.

[13:17] We don't have to go on a quest over the seas. God has communicated to us. He says God has come near to us.

All ancient cultures, all ancient cultures, where the divine secrets, the mysteries of how to live life, the secrets of the universe, defined things known only to the gods.

And it was only a very few courageous people in those cultures who were willing to go on the quest beyond civilized lands to connect with the gods and to bring back the secrets of the universe.

And Moses doesn't buy into that at all in any way. Deuteronomy says the God to whom highest heaven cannot contain has descended to us.

earth. He came down to Mount Sinai and he spoke. To access the secret universe, you do not need to be an elite scientist.

[14:38] You don't need to be a gifted artist. You don't need to be a regular attendee at an exclusive retreat in the rainforest. You don't need to climb to the top of the highest mountain or dive into the depths of the sea.

The secrets of the universe have traditionally been virtually in every hotel room in the Western world. Just sitting beside the bed in a drawer, top drawer normally.

Placed there by the Gideons. It's in the Bible and the Bible is everywhere. With estimated total sales of over five billion copies, the Bible is the best selling publication of all time.

It has had a profound influence. In fact, it has shaped both Western culture and history and most cultures around the globe.

And to date, it is translated or currently being translated into about half of the world's languages.

The secret of the universe is right under our noses and it is accessible.

[15:57] For sure, there are some hard things to understand. But the core message of the Bible is unbelievably accessible. It is right there.

What God wants of us is not hidden, it's not far off, it's not locked up into some vault. The word of God can be on our lips and taught to our children.

It is right in front of us, ready to be understood and obeyed. And yet, this accessibility and simplicity can be quite deceptive.

Because modern people have the same problem as ancient people. We tend to think that if any insight to be really important, then it has to be brilliant, it has to be sophisticated, it has to be new.

And the Bible's not any of those things. things. And so let me just say, if you are exploring Christianity right now, don't be offended by the simplicity and the ordinariness of the Bible.

[17:15] Even Christians struggle with the simplicity of their faith and the Bible. people. The Old Testament says we are saved by God's grace to be his special possession.

That's the summary of the Old Testament, saved by God's grace to be his special possession. And the New Testament adds that this is done and completed in the person of Jesus Christ.

It's as simple as that. So why is it so hard? Let's move to the final point, the difficulty, the Bible's difficult clarity.

The clarity and simplicity of God's word is in fact its difficulty. The reason we don't need to ascend to heaven or cross the abyss is because God is near and that means his word to us is near.

God has made himself and the way of salvation known to us simply and clearly. These analogies that Moses uses is a roundabout way of saying that relationship with God is not something that we have to pursue and achieve ourselves.

[18:36] We don't go on a quest to connect with the divine in order to have a relationship with him. The analogy Moses uses here is to reveal that God comes to us and he saves us by his grace.

Relationship with him is something that we receive, not something that we achieve. We also see in the second half of the passage that Moses seems to contradict himself in these verses.

How can Moses say things like the commandment is not too hard for you in verse 11 and that you can do it in verse 14.

You don't need to go up to heaven, you don't need to cross the sea, it's right in front of you. But then he says in verse 17, but if your heart turns away and you are not obedient and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.

You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses, now choose life.

[19:53] So if it's entirely by God's work to establish relationship with us, why does he include that?

Because on the surface when you read that it sounds very much like striving. It sounds very much like put your socks up and keep them pulled up, otherwise you're done.

It seems to contradict the first half of the passage, but it doesn't. The clue in understanding this is in fact the entire sermon of Deuteronomy is almost the last thing he says in chapter 30.

It's in verse 20. For the Lord is your life. Not you are your life, not your obedience is your life, the Lord is your life.

That is, they have life already, so this must be referring to something a bit more than just the fact that they're alive, it's referring to spiritual life, it's referring to eternal life.

[21:06] Up to this point in Deuteronomy, life is connected to obedience, death is connected to disobedience. obedience. The Bible is clear, it is simple, it is accessible, and God expects it to be obeyed.

And so life is connected to obedience and death is connected to disobedience. And yet, they've already failed multiple times. There's not a single person who's righteous, Romans chapter three. because the Bible also reveals our inability, our powerlessness, it reveals our sin, our lack of righteousness.

So verse 20 is not saying that if you obey God, he will give you life. It is saying he is your life.

And Paul explains it. in Romans chapter 10 when he picks up Deuteronomy 30. As he's proclaiming the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ to the church in Rome.

[22:19] I'm going to read it to you. Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Moses writes this about the righteous that is by the law.

The person who does these things will live by them. But the righteous that is by faith says, do not say in your heart, who will ascend into heaven? That is to bring Christ down.

Or who will descend to the deep? That is to bring Christ up from the dead. 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. 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.

What he says there in Romans 10 is that Jesus is the end of the law of righteousness. The law still exists to please God and to change your life, but it is never meant to be and never will ever meant

to be a means to stand before God justified and accepted.

[23 : 38] Why? Because Jesus came from heaven to us and then not just to us but went to the abyss of chaos and destruction and death to bring eternal life to everyone who will accept him.

And that's threatening. It is so simple. The message of the Bible is so simple.

Every bit of it screams out, look to Jesus, look to Jesus, every bit of it. And yet it is so, so hard.

So complex. So threatening. Because what kind of God has a bar of salvation that is so low?

What kind of God does that? A God of grace who allows anyone to come. A bar so low that anyone can step over it.

[24 : 55] Because it's a bar of grace, not a bar of works. And yet it's not such a low bar, is it? Not really.

It demands that we lose our pride. It demands that we lose our pride and the right to look down on any other human being.

It also demands that we surrender control of our life. If we are not prepared to let go of ourselves, we discover that the bar is in fact far too high for us.

Far too high. This is the threatening costliness of the free grace of God. The message of the Bible is so, so simple.

It is so clear. And yet it is so difficult to take. If you're exploring Christianity, understand the difficulty of the simplicity of the Christian faith.

[26 : 05] However, however, grasping the simplicity of the Christian faith as it is proclaimed in the Bible, in all of its difficulty, is in fact how you become a Christian.

In that moment, the moment the clarity and the simplicity of the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ hits you and you are willing to pay the cost of surrendering your pride and control of your life, is the moment that you enter into a relationship with the God who holds all the secrets of the universe.

It really is that simple and it really is that difficult. You see, this clarity, this doctrine that we're looking at this morning, the clarity of Scripture, historical document, is so far, so far from some dry biblical teaching, Christian teaching.

There is so much at stake on the clarity of Scripture. It insists that even the simplest disciple can understand the message of the Bible and be saved.

The Bible isn't just for pastors and scholars with a working knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. You don't need to know about Second Temple Judaism. You don't need to know about Greco-Roman customs nor ancient Near East religion.

[27 : 46] Nor do you need to be schooled in redaction criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and all that other stuff I had to do. And still trying to work out.

God is not the God of the smarty pants only, as much as we might want to make him such on the North Shore of Sydney. The clarity of Scripture reveals so much about the character of God.

What kind of God would reveal his love? What kind of God would reveal his redemption in terms so technical and concepts so profound that only an elite group of professional scholars could possibly understand them?

Not the God of the Bible. Relationship with him is accessible to all. And so if you are a Christian, say, well, I know the gospel, I don't need to know anything more, I've got to clear on the gospel, that's about it I need.

If that is your response, you do not yet know the gospel. You do not yet know the gospel. You must mind the depths, the depths of Scripture to get clearer and clearer picture of who God is.

[29 : 20] The majesty of this God. William Tindall's life was often in danger because of his efforts to translate the Bible into the language of the common people.

It was his goal in life was to make sure that the Bible was accessible to every person in the English speaking world. He was once in dispute with what he called a learned man about all people having access to God's word and this learned man said, no way, that's ridiculous, it's just for the pastors and the preachers and the priests.

And he said to him what is now famous words, if God spare my life before many years I will cause a boy that drives the plough, that he will have more knowledge of the scriptures than the Pope himself.

Tindall's pursuit of the clarity of scripture for all people ended up costing him his life. As he died, his final cry out, the final thing he said was effectively a prayer, it was a prayer, Lord, open the king of

England's eyes.

And I'm assuming it's because of what I preached last week, open his eyes that he might see the majesty and the glory of God in scripture. The God of grace in scripture.

[30 : 54] And so we pray, yes Lord, open our eyes too, that we might see the power and the privilege that we have in reading the Bible in a language that we can understand.

Open our eyes, Lord, so that we might see clearly the wonderful things that are in your word. Open our eyes to the truth of salvation by grace through Christ alone that you have clearly revealed to us in every page of scripture.

Open our eyes, Lord, that we might see your majesty and your meekness for our joy. Amen.