

CHALLENGING QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Lesson 1

Understanding the Bible

This lesson begins a study that I have entitled "Challenging Questions People Ask." All of the questions that we will address as part of this series come from real-life questions that I have been asked, including those submitted online via the Contact Wes link. My prayer is that you will find this study meaningful and that it will help your walk with Christ grow stronger and add new depth to your understanding of God, his son Jesus, and God's plan for you.

I would also like to take this opportunity to encourage you to continue developing your prayer time. How can any of us expect to know more about God and Jesus without actually seeking Him out in prayer? Above all, everything that we do we should be consistent with bathing everything in prayer, whether it is while you drive to work, or watch the children, or visit with a neighbor; we should be aware of God's presence and always be seeking Him. In that way, we open the door for God to speak with us and to help us grow, as we seek to learn more and more about Him.

In the Syllabus/Index for this series, I have posted a preliminary list of the questions that we will be examining. There have been other questions sent to me since I pulled together that list, but it will give you an idea of the study that we are about to embark upon.

Knowing and understanding God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit—and God's plan for us—is a challenge for us all. So this is why I have selected the following question for us as a place to begin our study. At its heart is a struggle that we all experience: difficulty in reading and understanding God's Holy Word.

Here is the question:

"I struggle because I'm not a reader. In spite of this, I force myself to read the Word, but I don't get much out of it. Lately, I have been reading the book of Isaiah, and I don't retain what I read. I re-read it and I still don't retain it, and I don't absorb very much of the rich meaning that I know is there. I take notes, and I re-read these notes to remind me of my observations, but it still seems like a bunch of pieces of a puzzle that just don't come together. I have a study Bible and other resources, but I think that the real issue is that it takes me so long to read. What is the best way to read the Bible over long periods of time and still be able to connect all of the pieces?"

So for our kick-off lesson in this series, let's consider the heartfelt question above.

The question immediately brings to mind several things, but let's begin at the beginning.

1. From the Bible, who else do we know who struggled with reading and understanding the Book of Isaiah? (See Acts 8:26-34.)

2. What happened that enabled him to understand the book?

3. What did this person ask in Acts 8:31?

From even this brief passage, several truths jump out at us: First, the Bible is difficult to understand. Second, even well-educated people like the Treasurer of Ethiopia could not understand it. Third, our understanding comes from God. And, finally, when God calls us to go—with little or no explanation as to why—we should faithfully follow His command. This is so that He can use us to help others in their understanding (while further solidifying our own understanding in the process).

All of us know that the Bible is difficult to understand, but I also think that we are all under the mistaken idea that it requires a degree from a seminary to understand it. The reality is that even seminary graduates do not understand it. You would also think that, of all the people in the world, the Apostles would have had a complete understanding of it. After all, they ate, slept, worked and studied under Christ. In fact, the forty days Jesus walked the earth after His resurrection were spent teaching His apostles, so surely they should understand God's Word.

4. What does Peter indicate to us regarding Biblical teaching in 2 Peter 3:15-16?

From Peter's words, we can take heart that even the Apostles were sometimes challenged in their understanding of God's Word. Accordingly, we are no less Christian and no less faithful if we do not understand all of it as well.

The key for us is to recognize that our understanding will only come from God, and in God's time. Further, there are truths found in God's Word that speak to how we can improve our understanding of how to study, so that when God speaks to us, we will get the most benefit from it.

5. What does God Himself tell us about His Word in Isaiah 55:11?

6. Considering Paul's admonition in Romans 10:17, from what does faith come?

7. And finally, God again shows us something important in Proverbs 2:1-6. According to this passage, we are to seek His understanding as if we were looking for silver, or hidden treasure (which His truths are!). If we do this; then where will our understanding subsequently come from?

Today, we are surrounded by almost limitless resources to assist in our study. Whether you use the internet or (like me) if you prefer books spread all over your study area when you study, we have no lack of information. However, none of these tools alone will impart wisdom and understanding. Real understanding will only come from God, and only if we earnestly seek Him.

8. What does Jesus instruct us to do in Matthew 7:7?

In light of our findings above, I would like to offer a few additional comments specifically related to our struggles with reading and understanding God's Word. First, we need to understand and acknowledge that each of us learns differently. One particular resource or method for study may not work for everyone. Some of us are readers with high comprehension; and some of us aren't visual at all, but are instead auditory—that is, we learn through hearing or listening. This is particularly true for people who are unable to read, or who simply have difficulty reading. Relatedly, not all of us have had the same learning experiences. For example, a seminary student is exposed to a completely different set of resources and ways of thinking about various topics compared to someone who was not able to graduate high school. This doesn't mean that the seminary student is "smarter" than the other person, but rather, that their experiences are "different."

What this means to each of us is that we will need to ask God to lead us to find those one or two things that will help us gain a better understanding of His Word. I have been blessed with how God has used my limitations to help my understanding of Him and His plan for my life. I know that He will do the same for you. As we observed in the examples of both the eunuch as well as Peter the Apostle, everyone struggles with the challenges of understanding scripture—everyone.

Expanding on this point further, there is one thing that I have learned over time that might help you as well: Specifically, although I have accumulated a fairly good-sized library of reference material over the years, I find that my most useful resource for study and lesson preparation is God's Word. I hold the view that if God has sent His Holy Spirit to live in my life and teach me, then the Bible is the place for me to spend my time. So as I study, I am always asking God to show me what He wants me to learn—not necessarily what the meaning of a verse is from an intellectual perspective, but rather what God is trying to teach me by having me study a particular passage.

Secondly, I have come to understand that you can read the Bible for two basic reasons: (1) to find "information," or to find "inspiration." Therefore, determining your reason for reading the Bible will also help you with your understanding. This has helped me recognize that each time I read a passage, I don't have to have a complete intellectual understanding of the passage or the book that contains it. For example, when reading something out of I Kings or II Kings, I don't need to get hung up on understanding all of the kings and which kingdom they were associated with. Instead, I can look at the general theme in that passage, e.g., rebellion against God, pride, and/or a desire to be one's own god—and the destruction that these sins bring. Those concepts are what I need to garner from these passages.

After taking a Precept Study (i.e., one of Kay Arthur's studies), a third thing that I now do is to underline a word or phrase that appears frequently in a specific passage. When you do this, you will discover that the focus required to find and underline these words or phrases will help you begin to understand the meaning—or at least the importance—of a word or phrase in a particular passage. For example, in Isaiah, underline everywhere you see a word or reference to "redeemer," "redeemed," "savior," "salvation," and similar words. You will soon notice that this is a book about redemption and about God's role as our only true redeemer.

A fourth thing that I will do when I read a verse or verses that really speak to me is to grab an index card and take the time to write that verse or verses out on the card. This is so that I can keep it with me in order to memorize it as I drive, sit in traffic, or encounter downtime during the day. This really adds to my understanding.

Lastly, I have discovered that I really enjoy listening to the Bible being read aloud. Accordingly, I have an audio copy of the Bible on CD. It's a theatrical version—it comes with sound effects, etc.—and during my long commute each day, I will spend some of that time listening to God's Word. In a typical year, I can listen through the entire Bible. Quite often, something that I missed seeing in the reading will "jump out" at me during the listening. It is yet another way to really help in your understanding, particularly if you struggle a little with understanding through reading alone.

I hope this study has helped you in your personal challenge to better understand God's Holy Word. It can be a difficult book to understand at times, and yet God will reveal so much to you if you seek Him and make understanding Him a first priority in your life. When I first began, I could not understand much of the Bible beyond those childhood stories of Noah, Moses, and David slaying the giant. Over the years, as my walk has grown, God has opened my eyes to so much more, and I am confident that He will do the same for you.

Thanks to all of you for your faithful study of His Holy Word. May God continue to bless you as you study with us.

In Christ,

Wes