

Can You Understand The Bible?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 July 2026

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0:00] Well, we are in the middle of a short series this month called God Speaks, and the aim of this! service is just to learn a little bit more about the Bible. And as we're going through this series! together, we're asking four questions. Do you need the Bible? Can you trust the Bible? Can you understand the Bible? And is the Bible enough? And each of these questions corresponds to four key aspects of the Reformed doctrine of Scripture. And these categories are as follows. The question, do you read the Bible?

Connects with the necessity of Scripture. Can you trust the Bible? Connects with the authority of Scripture. Can you understand the Bible? Is linked to the perspicuity of Scripture? And is the Bible enough? Is looking at the sufficiency of Scripture. And so, we're working our way through this. Last week, we asked the first question, do you need the Bible? We looked at the necessity of Scripture. And of course, our answer was yes. And that's because we cannot know God unless He reveals Himself. So, we need the Bible. We absolutely need the Bible in order to receive God's revelation, to receive the message of God's covenant promises, so that we can be restored into a covenant relationship with Him.

This morning, we looked at the authority of Scripture, and we asked the question, can you trust the Bible? And we saw that the Bible is God-breathed. It's the inspired Word of God. And He speaks to us.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. And as we looked at that this morning, we saw how this is all taking us, the authority of the Bible is taking us into that question of ultimate authority. And anything that claims to have ultimate authority must be self-authenticating. And what that's emphasizing is that the Bible's authority doesn't come from something outside itself. So, it's not the church that says the Bible's authoritative.

[2:02] It's not some religious expert that says the Bible's authoritative. It's the Bible that says the Bible is authoritative. Its authority comes from within itself, and that makes perfect sense, because in it, God is speaking. As we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit helps us to recognize its authority. And the big point we tried to emphasize this morning is that when you're looking at the authority of the Bible, we're not thinking about assessing a historical document. That's not really what it's about.

The Bible, instead, is about meeting a person who's speaking to you, because that's what the Bible is doing. In all of these things, we're looking, we're trying to make a connection between the nature of the Bible and the purpose of the Bible. And we're building a little diagram to help us do that. So, the nature of the Bible is that it's God's covenant word. God, the covenant king, God Almighty himself, he is speaking. And so, the Bible is his breathed out word. And that word is accomplishing a purpose. It's to establish God's covenant people. And these two categories are crucial for us to remember. The nature of the Bible and the purpose of the Bible are intimately connected as we think through the attributes of Scripture that are connected to our questions. So, in terms of necessity, the nature of the Bible, God speaking, and we need that if we're going to be his people. The authority of the Bible, God is the one who has authority. He's speaking. And so, to be his people, we have to recognize his authority. And so, hopefully, we're seeing how all of this starts to fit together. Now, as we reach this point in our study, you might be accepting everything that we've said so far, and you might be thinking, Thomas, I agree with everything that you've said. Or you might not be thinking that. You might be thinking, well, I'm not persuaded.

I'm not convinced. Or maybe you're somewhere in the middle, accepting, but still unsure, uncertain. Wherever you are, in terms of what you think of the Bible, a crucial question arises for all of us. Can you understand the Bible? And all of us need to ask that question, because if you agree with the necessity and the authority of the Bible, then you need to know what it's saying. You need to

understand what it says. If you're skeptical about the Bible, then you also need to understand what you're rejecting, because otherwise you're making a decision out of ignorance. And if you're unsure, then you definitely need to learn more. And so, all of this is taking us to the third part of our series, where we are asking the question, can you understand the Bible? And we are looking together at what we call the perspicuity of Scripture. Now, perspicuity is just a fancy word for clarity. What we're thinking about here is whether or not the Bible is clear. And as we look at that together tonight, we're going to turn back to 2 Peter chapter 3. Let me read from verse 15. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our

Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. To him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. And we're going to look at this passage, this chapter, and this whole question together under two headings, obscurity and clarity. So first of all, thinking about obscurity.

[6:16] Throughout this series, we've been referring several times to chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Chapter 1 is all about the Bible, and it's immensely helpful in terms of what it teaches. As I explained this morning, Westminster Confession of Faith is written in the 1640s, and it's a summary of what we believe the Bible teaches. It's very short, it's very helpful, and as a church, we subscribe to the Westminster Confession as what we believe is an accurate summary of what the Bible teaches. I'm going to read paragraph 7 of chapter 1. It says here, all things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all. Yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of scripture or other, that not only the learned but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

Now, there's lots of things that we'll draw out of this paragraph. What I want to highlight to begin with is that we can, from this paragraph, we can draw a distinction between what we call appropriate obscurity and inappropriate obscurity. And both of these can actually be seen from the chapter we read in 2 Peter. So first of all, speaking about appropriate obscurity, when the Westminster Confession of Faith says this here, that all things in scripture are not alike plain unto themselves, nor alike clear unto all, when it makes that statement, it's highlighting what Peter himself has highlighted in the chapter that we read. He speaks about some of the things that Paul has written, and he's highlighting that some of those things are hard to understand. And Peter's doing two crucial things in this little section.

First of all, he's highlighting that Paul's writings are scriptures, and that's actually massively important in terms of part of the recognition of the New Testament letters as part of what we call the canon of scripture, part of the books that are included in the inspired revelation that God has given. And so the Bible itself here is recognizing Paul's writings as scriptures. And so that word scriptures, of course, for Paul, for Peter, that's the word they would have used for the Old Testament. And so Peter is doing something very significant when he's putting the letters of Paul in that same category. So that's the first important thing that Peter does here. He's talking about Paul's writings. He describes them as scriptures. But the second thing he does that's important is that he's acknowledging that not everything that Paul says is easy to understand. And what's true of Paul is actually also true of Peter, and it's true of all the biblical writers. And the key point is that the Bible is not claiming that everything in the Bible is going to be immediately easy to understand. And again, this is important to recognize because this ties in with the nature of scripture. The Bible is God's self-revelation.

So God's revealing himself to us through the Bible. But as God gives that revelation of himself, the himself that he is revealing is the infinite immensity and glory of God Almighty.

[9:53] And that, by definition, is mind-blowing for all of us. And the interface between the uncreated, infinite, eternity of God and the created, finite universe that we live in as humans, the interface between that is always going to involve profound mystery. Therefore, there's an appropriate obscurity reality in the sense of the fact that the Bible is giving us a window into realities that are going to stretch our minds to their very limits. And that's captured magnificently in Isaiah chapter 55.

These are famous verses where God says, So what does that mean? It means that it's completely appropriate for the Bible to contain parts that we find hard to fully understand. And what Peter describes explicitly in verse 16 when he says that some parts of Paul's letters are hard to understand, he actually demonstrates indirectly through his own writings in the chapter. Because if you look at the passage that we read, some of the things that Peter talks about are actually quite difficult to understand. Because verses 8 to 10, you've got God's perspective on time, so that one day is a thousand years, a thousand years are as one day. He's speaking about the end of history. He's speaking about the destiny of the created universe. There's a whole lot in that that I don't fully understand and that I'm not able to fully explain. [11:48] A certain level of obscurity is appropriate. That makes sense because the Bible is giving us a window to the things of God. And the things of God are always, always going to be bigger than what we can fully grasp.

However, alongside that, what we really need to, what the Westminster Confession of Faith is kind of getting at, and what I want us to focus on, is the fact that we have to guard against inappropriate obscurity.

If you go back to that passage there, that paragraph from the Westminster Confession, one of the main reasons why this is included in the Westminster Confession, a statement like this, is because for centuries in the medieval church, the leadership of the church had attempted to kind of shroud the Bible in mystery.

And part of the reason why they did that was because it meant that only those who were in leadership in the church could really understand it. And so people didn't have access to the Bible, people weren't able to read it, it wasn't translated into their language, and instead everything had to come through the leadership in the church.

And what that basically resulted in is there was basically a pattern of what we could call spiritual elitism.

[13:13] So that there's an elite group who understand it, and normal people like you, you're not going to get it, so you have to rely on them. Now, lots of things in the Westminster Confession of Faith, a friend of mine who teaches on this in a seminary in America, he describes these as, he describes them as yell-ats.

And what he means by that is that the writers of the Westminster Confession of Faith are yelling at someone that they disagree with. And so this is yelling at, it's a yell-at, yelling at, this whole idea of elitism, that only certain ordained people can actually understand the Bible.

That elitism is being very deliberately opposed. And instead, those who wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith are adamant that ordinary people, learned or unlearned, can understand the key truths that are revealed in the Bible for our salvation.

Now, you might be thinking, well, okay, that's an interesting history lesson, Thomas. But this whole idea of inappropriate obscurity is super important for us to think about. Why? Because it's dangerous.

And it's dangerous for two reasons. First of all, inappropriate obscurity is dangerous because it can be used as a means of exerting control.

[14:34] And so often, that's what spiritual elitism is aiming at. It's individuals or groups that are trying to use their kind of specialist knowledge to control and to manipulate others.

And you actually see this again. This is the very thing that Peter was tackling in his letter, that there were people, there were scoffers who were coming, claiming all sorts of things, giving all sorts of false teaching, undermining what the apostles had been teaching.

And they're using that as a weapon to shake the faith of these believers. They're asking these questions. Why hasn't Jesus come? Why is nothing changing? And all the time, they're trying to exercise their control, exercise their power, in order to undermine their faith.

And that spiritual elitism was a massive issue that led to the Reformation. And that's something that's so, so important to recognize, that in the run-up to the Reformation, this issue of spiritual elitism was a massive, massive problem.

And you had people who were saying that all sorts of teaching, one of the big things was what they called indulgences, which was a thing that you could buy from the church that would get your relatives out of purgatory.

[15:50] And so people would go around and basically say, look, give more money. It'll mean that your relative, your grandparents, your parents or whoever, who are suffering in purgatory just now,

they will be relieved from their suffering.

And all of it's kind of a secret, specialist knowledge that's just used to manipulate people. And that still happens today.

You've got groups and cults. They've got secret, additional knowledge. They claim that God's spoken directly to them. They've got this kind of insight that ordinary people don't have.

And all of it is used to exercise control over people. And all of that is an abuse of power. All of it is hugely dangerous.

And that's why whenever we teach anything in our church, we are not doing it and we must never do it in a way that says, believe this because I tell you.

[16:45] That's not the way we want to teach. We want to instead teach in a way that shows you the Bible so that you can see what it says for yourself.

And on the basis of your judgment and on the basis of what you see and you understand, you respond. And of course, our great hope is that you will respond by trusting in Jesus and following him.

So there's this danger in inappropriate obscurity because it can become a means of exerting control over others. But there's a second danger. And the second danger is even more dangerous because it actually looks much less dangerous.

And what I'm referring to here is the fact that we can respond to the obscurity in the Bible by adopting a position of respectful uncertainty.

and that's a dangerous position to adopt. And the big problem with that is that it's a position that can look and feel as though it's balanced and courteous and humble.

[18:00] And, you know, we look at the claims of the Bible and we think, well, I'm not hostile to what the Bible says. But we're maybe like, well, I'm not convinced either. We've still got doubts and hesitations. And so we think, well, I'm going to just settle for a position of respectful uncertainty.

And at one level, respectful uncertainty feels a whole lot better than a position of hostility or mockery. And I guess at one level it is. But we've got to be so careful because in terms of eternity, respectful uncertainty is deadly.

And here is where you have to kind of, we have to get our categories right because respectful uncertainty in matters of faith is not the same as respectful uncertainty in an art gallery.

You might go into an art gallery and you come out thinking, well, you know, that was impressive, but I have absolutely no idea what the artist was getting at and you kind of move on with your life and it doesn't make much difference.

Respectful uncertainty in matters of faith is not like that. Instead, it's like respectful uncertainty in a doctor's surgery or an operating theater. If you're sick and a doctor is like, well, I'm just going to be respectfully uncertain.

[19:12] They don't really bother examining you. They don't really bother operating because they're happy to be uncertain. If that happens, then you're in serious trouble. Because, because in regard to the gospel, in regard to matters of faith, respectful uncertainty, it might seem polite, it's actually incredibly dangerous.

And something massive has happened in our society over the last hundred years or so. Because in our society, questions of faith have moved from the category of life and death into the category of lifestyle choice.

So instead of it being a matter of life or death that you have got to get right, it just becomes a matter of life. That's a categorical error.

When we do that, we're getting our categories wrong. Because if we're putting questions of faith into the questions, into the same kind of categories, we put the questions of, well, you know, what kind of food do we eat?

What kind of things do we spend our money on? What kind of people do we vote for? What kind of charities do we give to? That's where we put matters of faith now. It's in these matters of lifestyle choice. That's the wrong category.

[20:30] Because what we believe about God was and is and always will be a matter of eternal life or death.

All of this is highlighting the importance of appropriate expectations. We should not expect to understand everything. So please, please do not worry if there's things in the Bible you read and you're like, I don't understand that.

That's to be expected. But equally, we should not think, well, I'm not going to understand anything at all. That's not true. You absolutely can. And that takes us to our second point, this whole question of clarity.

We're asking the question, can you understand the Bible? And despite the fact that we can't understand everything in the Bible, the answer is still yes. And again, we are connecting this to the question, we're connecting this to the nature and the purpose of the Bible.

As we're saying, the Bible is God's covenant revelation of himself to us. It's his covenant word. And the whole purpose of that is so that we can know him. And that can only happen if we understand what he's saying.

[21:48] That's why perspicuity, clarity, is a key attribute of the Bible and it ties in. It ties right in with the nature and purpose of Scripture. It also ties in with necessity and authority.

If we need the Bible and if we're trusting the Bible, then we need to know, we need to understand what it's saying. Now again, we need to just unpack a little bit more about what this involves. And again, paragraph 7 of the Westminster Confession of Faith helps us here. And the thing that's clearly emphasized in terms of perspicuity is those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation is clear.

That's the information about which the Bible is clear. And that clarity comes in different parts of the Bible opened in some place of Scripture or the other.

And it's opened up in a way that it does not depend on an expert education. It's suitable for the learned and for the unlearned. And it doesn't involve some kind of secret practice.

[22:55] Instead, it just involves due use of ordinary means. And we'll see a wee bit more about what that means in a couple of minutes. And that clarity is sufficient. Now, important, it doesn't say exhaustive.

It doesn't say that you will have an exhaustive understanding of everything. Absolutely not. But you can have a sufficient understanding of what the Bible reveals in regard to salvation.

Now, that clarity that Scripture gives involves two sides of the one coin. And so, on one side of that coin, the Bible gives clarity in terms of the problem.

And this is important to recognize. You don't need to be an expert in anything to understand that sin is a problem. Your own heart tells you that, both in terms of your sense of justice when you see wrongs being done to others and in the voice of your own conscience when you know that there's things that you have said or done that are wrong.

And the Bible makes all of that, makes the problem of sin unmistakably clear. And you can see verses like Romans 3.23, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

[24:11] Romans 6.23, the wages of sin is death. Hebrews 4, no creatures hidden from his sight but all naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.

Now people might disagree with what these verses are saying. Lots of people do disagree with them and maybe even some of you disagree with them. Lots of people do. But whether you agree or not, the message is crystal clear.

Sin is a massive problem from the Bible's perspective. But on the other side of the coin and even more importantly, the Bible is crystal clear in terms of the solution.

And we see this magnificently if we go back to Isaiah 55. So I read earlier on verses 8 and 9 that talks about how there are some areas of appropriate obscurity.

God says, my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways but as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts are higher than your thoughts. There is appropriate obscurity, absolutely.

[25:17] But if you look at the two verses before that that I'm going to add to the screen just now, it says, seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he's near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts.

Let him return to the Lord that he may have compassion on him and to our God for he will abundantly pardon. That is crystal clear that God is calling us to come to him that he might have compassion on us.

The same is clear throughout the Bible. It's clear in John 3, 16 for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

And it's crystal clear in the end of the chapter that we read. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you're not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your

own stability but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus.

Amen. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. Jesus is our Lord and our Saviour. He is the one that we need to look to.

[26 : 35] And again, all of this keeps taking us back to the nature and purpose of the Bible. The whole reason that God is making this so clear is because he wants you to be saved.

And the nature of the Bible as God's breathed out word, the purpose of the Bible in order to make us God's covenant people, all of that is tied to the clarity of the Bible which is expressing to us all the fact that God wants you to be saved.

And all of this gives rise to one of the most important lessons that we can ever learn. The massive lesson is this.

Don't overcomplicate it. Don't overcomplicate it. Look at what God is saying.

He's saying, seek the Lord while he may be found. He's saying, whoever believes in him will not perish. He's saying, Jesus has come to be our Lord and Savior.

[27 : 52] We need to trust him. and so many people add a million other complicated steps that do not need to be there.

I need to know this. I need to learn this. I need to change that. I need to fix this. I need to experience this. This has to happen. That has to happen. This, this, this, this. No, it doesn't. That doesn't.

You don't need any of that. don't over complicate it. That which is necessary for salvation is so simple and so clear.

And all Jesus is calling you to do is trust him. Now, as we recognize all of this and as we close, I'm just going to pick out three or four additional practical points that arise from this and that are important for us to recognize.

And in doing this, I'm just going to take you through some of the additional bits that are in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter one. The first of these is translating the Bible. There's a whole paragraph in the Westminster Confession about translating the Bible and it all connects with this idea of the perspicuity of Scripture.

[29 : 08] This was one of the problems prior to the Reformation. The Bible was only available in Latin in places like the UK. Nobody had their own copy of the Bible and so only the priests could read it.

The Bible was at church. People didn't have access to it. One of the massive reasons why the Reformation happened was because people started to translate the Bible into people's languages. They started to print the Bible.

They started to distribute the Bible so that people could read it for themselves. That's become a massive principle of the Reformed Church ever since. The perspicuity of Scripture means that we must not have the Bible hidden in obscure, unknown, inaccessible language.

Instead, it has to be in the language that ordinary people can understand. That's what that paragraph there is emphasizing. That's also just a reminder of why the work of Bible translation is so, so important.

The Scottish Bible Society and other international Bible societies do such an important and vital work to continue this work of translating the Bible. The clarity of Scripture connects with the need for it to be translated into the ordinary language of ordinary people.

[30 : 26] Second thing that's important to highlight here is a question, it's an issue in regard to interpreting the Bible. Paragraph 9 speaks about this. I'll say a little bit more about this next week when we talk about the sufficiency of Scripture.

I'm just going to read this paragraph just now where it says, the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself and therefore when there's a question about the truth and full sense of any Scripture which is not manifold but one, it must be searched and known by other places which speak more clearly.

The way we summarise that passage is we say Scripture interprets Scripture. So if there's one part of the Bible that doesn't make sense to you, you go to another part of the Bible to help clarify it. So reading the Bible helps you to understand the various parts of the Bible.

And as I said, I'll say a little bit more about that next week when we think about the sufficiency of Scripture. Practical point number three is that although this perspicuity of Scripture means that all of us can understand the Bible individually, that doesn't mean that we just go it alone in terms of

reading the Bible.

Sometimes people can think that, that, you know, I'll read the Bible, I don't need anybody else, I'll just do it by myself, on my own, and I can manage fine without anyone else's help. What we have to remember there is that in paragraph seven it speaks about due use of the ordinary means that's reflecting the pattern that's set in the Bible where people learn the Bible together.

[31 : 52] And so they do it through meeting together at church where the Bible's read, where there's preaching, where there's prayer, where there's sacraments, where there's singing. All of these things are done together and all of these things help us to understand more that's in the Bible.

So it's important to say that although we can all understand the Bible, we mustn't, please don't go it alone. This is something that we do to care that we're talking about. Two more points. Number four, the perspicuity of Scripture, the clarity of Scripture that we're talking about, emphasizes the crucial point that if things don't make sense, and if things don't add up, and if we don't get what the gospel is all about, the problem is not in the Bible.

The fog is not in the Bible. The fog is in us. And the great example in Scripture of this was the Pharisees.

They could not see it. Jesus was right in front of them. He was performing miracles right in front of them. He was teaching them right in front of them. They did not believe, they could not see, they could not accept, and it wasn't because Jesus wasn't clear.

It's because they were blind. And that's why our prayer always has to be, Lord, open my eyes. And then last of all, the final practical lesson that comes from this, that's important for us to remember, is that, as we've been saying, there are many things in the Bible that are magnificent, that are profound, that we will spend eternity learning about.

[33 : 28] But this doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture reminds us that the things that matter most in the Bible are crystal clear.

The Bible is telling us to turn away from sin. It's telling us to trust in Christ. It's telling us to love God, to love one another.

It's telling us to follow Jesus every day. That's the stuff that matters most. That's the stuff that's crystal clear.

And our prayer is that the Lord would press these truths into our hearts and that that would shape all of our lives forevermore. Amen. Let's pray. Let's pray.