

The Clarity of Scripture

Deuteronomy 30:11-14, Psalm 119:97-104, James 1:22-25

Today we wrap up a four-week series we've entitled ***Formed by the Word***. We have been studying four attributes of Scripture that Protestants have held down through the centuries. These attributes of Scripture should fuel our passion for being formed by God's Word.

Here are the four attributes:

- * The Authority of Scripture: it is final.
- * The Necessity of Scripture: it is needed.
- * The Sufficiency of Scripture: it is enough.
- * The Clarity of Scripture: it is understandable.

Today we are studying "the clarity of Scripture," sometimes this is called the perspicuity of Scripture, which basically means that God's Word is understandable: ***God has spoken in the Scriptures through human authors in ways that are understandable***. I'll add some nuance and clarification as we work our way through several Scriptures. But the core idea behind the "clarity of Scripture" is that God's Word is understandable because God is a good communicator; he himself has spoken through human authors in ways that we can understand. As Kevin DeYoung put it, "Ordinary people using ordinary means can accurately understand enough of what needs to be known for them to be fruitful Christians" (*Taking God at His Word*, chapter 4).

Before we look at specific Scriptures, I want to mention one thing that "the clarity of Scripture" ***doesn't*** mean. I'll mention a couple other things later in this message. The clarity of Scripture doesn't mean that everybody has the same aptitude when it comes to reading and understanding Scripture. I've known people with learning disabilities that find it challenging to read and comprehend sentences and paragraphs and chapters and books. Some people simply learn better by hearing than reading. Since by definition Scripture is literature involving grammar and genre and figures of speech, some people find it easier to engage the written word than others.

If you for whatever reason find it hard to read and understand Scripture, take comfort in the fact that most Christians who've lived haven't had their own copy of the Bible (printing press was invented in the 15th century). Therefore they haven't learned Scripture by reading; they've learned Scripture by hearing it, thinking about it, talking about it, singing it, and living it out. There are ways to engage God's Word that don't primarily involve reading. If you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and you are passionate (not apathetic) about hearing God's voice through the Scriptures, you can understand enough of what you need to know to be a fruitful follower of Christ.

We are going to consider a number of Scriptures that either teach or illustrate the clarity of Scripture. I've grouped these Scriptures under two headings which reflect two emphases of the clarity of Scripture. The first has to do with ***Confidence*** and the second with ***Accountability***.

The clarity of Scripture gives us confidence that through the Holy Spirit we can understand the message of Scripture. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14, Psalm 119:98-99)

If you don't believe that you can understand Scripture, you probably won't approach the Word wholeheartedly. But if you believe that God has communicated in ways that are understandable, you will approach the Word with confidence that he will speak to you. Let's consider some passages that either teach or illustrate this type of confidence.

Deuteronomy 29 and 30 contain the concluding challenge Moses gives the children of Israel before they entered into the Promised Land. Moses lays before them two options: life and death. If you love God and therefore obey God you will experience life and blessing. But if you worship and serve other gods, you will experience death and curses. Therefore Moses pleads with them to "choose life" by obeying God's commands (which is also God's "voice"; see 30:19-20).

Verses 11 through 14 are significant for the topic of the clarity of Scripture. Here Moses stresses that keeping his commandments is **possible** because his words are **accessible**.

11 "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off.

For forty years Moses had witnessed first hand how the people justified their disobedience. And he anticipates that when they entered the Land they would say, "The commandments of God are too hard. . . surely God will understand if we don't do everything he's commanded." And he anticipates that they would say, "The commandments of God are too far away. . . after all Moses had to go up on the mountain to hear from God."

12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 14 But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

Because God had spoken to Moses, and because Moses had spoken and written down what God had said, the word was "very near" to them; it was accessible. And because it was accessible, it was to be "in [their] mouths" and "in [their] hearts." In other words, they were to internalize it and talk about it. This is exactly what Moses had told them back in Deuteronomy 6:

5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today **shall be on your heart**. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.

Not only can grown-ups understand God's Word when it's in our hearts and on our lips. God's Word is clear enough for children to understand.

This is incredibly good news that is worth believing. The past three weeks we've seen that the Scriptures themselves teach that God's Word is **authoritative**, **necessary**, and **sufficient**. It would be a cruel joke indeed if God's Word weren't also **clear** and understandable!

I hope you've been soaking in Psalm 119 as we've discussed the attributes of Scripture. Verses 98 and 99 illustrate the clarity of Scripture.

98 Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is ever with me.

99 I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your testimonies are my meditation.

The premise here is that the psalmist's enemies and teachers don't love God and meditate on his Word. But the psalmist fears and loves God and therefore meditates day and night, giving him wisdom and understanding that people older and smarter don't have. The same thing is true for you: Because Scripture is understandable and profitable (2 Timothy 3:16) you can have more wisdom and understanding than people who are older than you, who have a higher IQ than you, and than people who have more education than you. After all, as Walker Percy pointed out, it is possible to "make all A's and still flunk life" (*The Second Coming*).

I went to seminary at Trinity, north of Chicago; seminary is basically graduate school for theology. One of my professors, Dr. Walt Kaiser, told us something I'll never forget. Dr. Kaiser wanted us to know that his father (who didn't graduate from high school) had a better theology than the vast majority of us who would graduate from Trinity. Why? Because his dad read the Bible from cover to cover every year for five or six decades. The message of the Bible is accessible and understandable to those who internalize it.

And Scripture makes clear that our confidence in understanding Scripture is not in ourselves. Our confidence is in God who promised that in the new covenant in Christ's blood he would write his word on our hearts. In Ezekiel 36:26–27 God promised:

26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

As well, in Jeremiah 31:33, God said that in the new covenant. . .

“ . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”

And so our confidence is that the Spirit within us will give us understanding and write God's word on our hearts.

The clarity of Scripture gives us confidence that through the Holy Spirit we can understand the message of Scripture.

In light of this statement, I want to mention a couple of other things that the clarity of Scripture **doesn't** mean. First, the "clarity of Scripture" doesn't mean that every passage is easy to understand and interpret. Some passages are notoriously difficult. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul mentions that people were being "baptized on behalf of the dead." D.A. Carson, one of the foremost biblical scholars of our day, says that he is aware of over 40 different interpretations of what that phrase is talking about; he thinks three of those interpretations are most likely, but he can't pick one over the others. That phrase, "being baptized on behalf the dead" is not very clear. But it's only found once in the entire Bible. That's not to imply that a teaching needs to be found more than once in Scripture to be accepted as true. But the core doctrines related to salvation and sanctification are found over and over many times in Scripture. Everything needed for life and godliness is **very** clear. Don't be surprised if you come across something in Scripture that you find troubling or difficult to understand.

Second, the "clarity of Scripture" doesn't mean that we don't need teachers. God himself has gifted people to be teachers in the body of Christ. But teachers are not our authority; Scripture remains our authority. The best teachers don't give the impression that they have knowledge and insight that nobody else does; the best teachers explain the meaning of the Scriptures themselves. You come away more convinced of the clarity of Scripture when they teach.

The clarity of Scripture should give us confidence about God's willingness to teach and our ability to understand.

The clarity of Scripture makes us accountable to believe and obey what God has communicated. (Matthew 12:3,5; James 1:22-25)

This accountability is evident from the very first pages of Scripture. When Adam and Eve disobeyed the simple command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were accountable. When God questioned them, Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent. God didn't say, "Oh, I'm so sorry, maybe I wasn't as clear as I should have been . . ." No, he told Adam that he would suffer the consequences of disobeying the command, ". . . of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat. . ." Because God had spoken clearly, they were accountable.

In the same way, because God has spoken clearly in Scripture we are also accountable to what he has said. God expecting us to take his words seriously isn't unreasonable; no, it's fully appropriate. We commonly hold people accountable to do what we've said: parents with children, teachers with students, employers with employees, etc. Let's say you're a teacher and you've given an assignment very clearly in writing. How do you respond when student fails to turn in that assignment and gets upset when it affects

their grade? You can give them all sorts of grace, but you probably point out that you were very clear about the assignment and when it was due. After all, ***you put it in writing***. Our Creator, our Sustainer, our Redeemer has spoken clearly in Scripture; he has put in writing his will for us. It's fully appropriate for him to hold us accountable to what he has said.

This was Jesus' attitude toward the Hebrew Scriptures. We find recorded in the gospels six different scenarios in which Jesus says to people, "Have you not read" something. The implication is that because it was written, it was something they should have understood, believed, and obeyed. I'll give one example. In Matthew 12 we read that the Pharisees noticed one Sabbath day that Jesus' disciples were plucking and eating "heads of grain" as they walked through a field. They accused Jesus' disciples of doing something "unlawful" on the Sabbath. Here's Jesus' response:

3 He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: 4 how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?"

Jesus expected them to understand the precedent set back in 1 Samuel 21 when David and his men were hungry and entered the temple ate the "bread of the Presence." Even though it was unlawful for anyone but the priests to eat that bread, David and his men weren't condemned. When Jesus said, "Have you not read. . ." he was saying that they should have understood that Scripture and not condemned the innocent. (See also Matthew 12:5; 19:4; 21:16; 22:31; Mark 12:10)

Let's consider one more passage that presupposes the clarity of Scripture and stresses our accountability to understand and obey God's Word. In James 1:22 we read this:

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

The command, "But be doers of the word" presupposes the clarity of Scripture: God's word is clear enough for us to understand it and do it (i.e., put it into practice). And this command makes clear that we are accountable to obey it; if we only hear it but don't put it into practice we are deceiving ourselves.

23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

Just as a mirror clearly show us what we look like, so too God's Word shows us things we need to know, things we would never know if they'd not been revealed. James says that the person who hears the word but doesn't do it is like the person who looks in a mirror and forgets what it reveals. The implication is that we are accountable to live out what the Scriptures reveal; it's not merely information to hear and forget.

But notice in verse 25 the blessing that comes to the person who does what the Word reveals:

25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

This is the blessing promised in Psalm 1 (as Brian explained last week). When we hear the word, remember it all day long, and seek to do what God says, we experience the favor of God. Hearing and doing the Word is only possible because God has spoken clearly in Scripture. ***The clarity of Scripture makes us accountable to believe and obey what God has communicated.***

Here's my question for each of us: Do you live your life with the conviction that because Scripture is our authority and because Scripture is clear, you are accountable to believe and obey all that is taught in Scripture? If you and I really believe that, we will be passionate - Psalm 119 passionate - about being formed by the Word. And so the clarity of Scripture should give us a sense of confidence as well as a sense of accountability.

I'm aware that you may be listening to this message thinking, "That all sounds good in theory, but it's all so overwhelming to me." I get that, especially if you are just starting out in your walk with God or if you've never established habits of meditating on Scripture. If that's you, I would encourage you to slow down, begin a steady diet of Scripture, and allow God to transform your life over time. Think in terms of months and years, not days and weeks. That's how we learn in general.

It's football season, so here's my football illustration related to the clarity of Scripture. Just like many people find Scripture to be bewildering, many people find American football bewildering. There are hundreds of rules that apply to different players in different situations at different times during the game. So how do you get to the place where you understand football intuitively (and therefore enjoy it)? Watch several hundred football games. Don't sit alone reading the NFL rulebook. Watch hundreds of games with others, talk about it with others, ask questions. If you invest a few thousand hours over many years, you will understand football.

And if you want to be formed by the Word, for as many years as God gives you on earth, invest hundreds and thousands of hours reading the Scriptures, praying Psalm 119, thinking about the Scriptures, hearing the Word taught, talking with other people about the Scriptures, and doing the Scriptures. If you humbly seek God through his Word over a long period of time, the Holy Spirit will transform you in the image of Jesus Christ.