

CAN I UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?

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The common conception today among many, if not most, church members, and many preachers, is that we just cannot understand the Bible. The idea is that we are not expected to understand, and it just doesn't make any difference anyway. But is this true? Not if we believe Ephesians 5:17: "So then do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is." The will of the Lord is revealed in the Scriptures; therefore this is a direct command of God that we are to understand. How can we say the Bible is intended to be "mysterious" and "beyond words" if it is a *revelation* from God? There are some things in the New Testament called "mysteries" but wherever the word is used the "mystery" is revealed and explained. Romans 16:25, 26 states: "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the *revelation of the mystery* which has been kept secret for long ages past, but *now is manifested* by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been *made known* to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith."

The Apostle Paul further stated: "...When you read you *can understand* my insight in the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now *been revealed* to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit." (Eph. 3:4,5). Concerning his preaching of the word he said: "that is the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has *now been manifested* to His saints" (Col. 1:26), and "praying...that we may *speak forth the mystery of Christ*." The mysteries of Scripture were "things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him," but "to us God *revealed* them through the Spirit." (I Cor 2:9,10). The Apostle continues: "now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that *we might know* the things freely given to us by God" (ver.12).

Concerning our understanding of things revealed, Moses wrote long ago: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). There were many "secret things" of which the Old Testament saints had no revelation. For example God's purpose and grace in Christ. II Timothy 1:9,10: "...His own purpose and grace was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been *revealed* by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus." The Apostle further says: "The Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe, but before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was *later to be revealed*" Gal. 3:22, 23). There are some things in the New Testament that have not been revealed and are therefore some of the "secret

things that belong to the Lord our God." I John 3:2: "Beloved, now we are the children of God and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be." And Romans 8:18: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." We will now look at some of the "mysteries" that were "hidden from the past ages" that are no longer mysteries because they have been revealed to us. Matthew 13:11; "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." This is in response to the disciples asking Jesus why he spoke in parables. The multitude could not understand his teaching concerning the kingdom, to them it was a mystery. Jesus then quoted Isaiah 6:9 describing their hardness of heart. He then said the mystery of the kingdom had been revealed to the Apostles. It is no longer a mystery.

Romans 11:25: "For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation..." This was the mystery of the hardening of Israel and the fullness of the Gentiles. Paul has explained it all in this chapter so they would not be uninformed.

Romans 16:25: "Now to him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested and by the Scriptures of the prophets according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith." Note: the mystery has been revealed by the Scriptures and has been known to all nations and leads to faith.

I Corinthians 2:7: "We speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory." This wisdom of God could be understood but "none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (ver. 8). This part of the wisdom of God was at one time hidden, but now has been made known through the teaching of the Apostles. It is no longer hidden from us and is therefore no longer a mystery. It is in this context that Paul cites Isaiah's words: "things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love him. (ver. 9), then he says "For to us God revealed them through the Spirit" (ver. 10). He has given us His Spirit "that we might know the things freely given us by God, which things we speak" (ver. 12, 13). This wisdom of God is no longer a mystery.

I Corinthians 15:51,52: "Behold I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable and we shall be changed." Paul is here answering two questions: "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" His answer is not a mystery that cannot be understood. He tells the Thessalonians "We do not want you to be uninformed about those who are asleep" (I Thess. 4:13). He tells the Corinthians

“Behold I tell you a mystery.” The resurrection of the dead was a mystery in “ages past”, (the one exception to this statement is Daniel 12:2) but it now has been fully revealed. Job asked: “If a man dies shall he live again? (Job 14:14). The Sadducees, who were the priestly party, did not believe in a resurrection (Matt. 22:23, Acts 23:8). Paul has explained this mystery.

Ephesians 3:3-6: “By revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit, to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” We note the mystery had been made known and could be understood.

Ephesians 5:32: “This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.” “This mystery is great” does not mean it continues to be a mystery. In verses 22-31 he explains the mystery of Christ and the church by using the marriage relationship as recorded in Genesis 2:24 to illustrate and explain the relationship between Christ and the church.

Colossians 1:24-28: The preaching of the word of God is “the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to his saints, to whom God willed to make known what the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles which is, Christ in you, the hope of glory.” This mystery was not known in “ages past” but by the word being manifested among the Gentiles it is now no mystery that “Christ in you” is the hope of glory. Today many who say we cannot understand the Bible know nothing of this glory.

II Thessalonians 2:7: “The mystery of lawlessness is already at work, only he who restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.” Paul does not want the Thessalonians to be “quickly shaken from their composure or disturbed either by spirit or letter” (ver. 2), and he wants “no one to deceive you” (ver. 3), and “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” and the one that “now restrains him was going to be taken out of the way” (ver. 7), therefore it seems to us he would not tell them a mystery they could not understand. He had warned them of this before (ver. 5). Most prophecy preachers say all this is future. We say it took place in the days of the New Testament and they knew who the lawless one was and what restrained him. Paul is further telling them that Jesus would come in judgment and with the breath of his mouth (that is his word) the lawless one would be brought to an end. This, then, was no mystery to the Thessalonians since Paul was revealing it to them.

I Timothy 3:16: “And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” The King James Version reads “God was manifested in the flesh...” The word “God” is not in this passage. The word is “*hos*” which means “who” or “whom,” it is not the word “God”. The mystery of godliness has been revealed as being: He (Christ) was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, beheld by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world,

taken up in glory.” This was not revealed “in ages past” but was a mystery until God revealed it in Christ. It was a mystery even to the angels and the Prophets that prophesied it. I Peter 1:10-12: “As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”

Revelation 1:20: “As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands.” This mystery is explained in the same verse: “the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

Revelation 10:7: “In the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God is finished, as He preached to His servants the prophets.” If “the mystery of God” is finished, why do we have another mystery in chapter 17:5? Chapter 11 deals with final things and ends with the judgment of the dead. Chapter 12 begins another record of the events leading up to the judgment again, covering much of the same ground as the first section, but in a different perspective. Therefore chapter 10:7 is speaking of the final mystery being revealed.

Revelation 17:5: “And upon her forehead a name was written, a mystery, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.” The angel tells John, “I shall tell you the mystery of the woman and beast that carries her” (ver. 7). He then, in symbolic language describes the beast and in verse 18 he says “the woman whom you saw is (present tense) the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.” And what is “the great city?” Let Scripture interpret Scripture: Rev. 11:8 “...the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also the Lord was crucified.” He was crucified in Jerusalem. Therefore the woman is the great city Jerusalem. Most scholars date the writing of Revelation after 90 AD and therefore could not refer to the destruction of Jerusalem. Contrary to most authorities we contend Revelation was written before 70 AD and thus concerns the destruction of the city.

Note the many times such phrases “revealed,” “revelation,” “understanding,” “that you may know” and “I will tell you the mystery” are used in these Scriptures. If it took Divine revelation to make these mysteries known and we have been given the Spirit “that we might know the things freely given us by God” (I Cor. 2:12), then will not we be held accountable for our knowledge and understanding of these mysteries as well as that which is not said to be a mystery? It was only after the ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit that these mysteries were revealed. It is only by the Holy spirit that we can know the things freely given us by God (I Cor. 2:12). Until Jesus was glorified, and Holy Spirit was given (John 7:38-39) these things could not be known. The Apostles who spent over three years with Christ were limited in their knowledge of

spiritual things. Jesus rebuked them many times for their lack of faith (Mt. 14:31; 6:8, 26). Only after the resurrection did they believe the Scriptures and the word spoken by Jesus (John 2:22). The nine Apostles were part of the “unbelieving generation” (Mark 9:19). Peter places him on the level of Moses and Elijah (Mt. 17:4). He rebuked them for their “littleness of faith (Mt. 17:20). Peter rebukes and denies him, Judas betrayed him, they all fled from the crucifixion (except John). The two on the Emmaus Road thought of him as a prophet (Luke 24:19). They refused to believe he was alive (Mark 16:11). He reproaches them for their unbelief and hardness of heart (Mark 15:14). When he tried to explain to them the Messiah would suffer and be killed and rise again (Isaiah had prophesied of this: Isa. 53), he rebuked Peter by calling him “Satan” (Mt. 16:23) “and they understood none of these things, and this saying was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said” (Luke 18:34). After spending three years with Christ he said to them “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.” (John 16:12, 13).

Even after the resurrection they did not understand the nature of his kingdom (Acts 1:6), and it was only after the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2) they began to understand what it was all about. But even with the Holy Spirit’s direction Peter was slow to understand the Gentiles were included in God’s grace. It took three visions to convince him to go the house of Cornelius, a Gentile in Caesarea, to preach the gospel to him and his house (Acts 10). After this it would seem that Peter understood the Lord’s purpose. At the council in Jerusalem to discuss the subject of the Gentiles being recognized as Christians without keeping the Law of Moses, Peter declared: “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God bore witness to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their heart by faith” (Acts 15:7-9). Yet soon after this council and Peter’s statement concerning the Gentiles, we read: “But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all ‘Do you being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”

All this says that even if we have the Holy Spirit and know much about the Scriptures and God’s purpose, this does nothing for us if we do not act upon it. Having the Holy Spirit does not mean we automatically know and understand the Scriptures, we must “Be diligent (study KJV) to present yourselves approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15,16). Paul further urges Timothy to “continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of” (II Tim 3:14), and Jesus had said “If you continue in my word, then you are truly my disciples.” Peter

ends his farewell letter by saying “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (II Pet. 3:18).

In I Corinthians 6 Paul asks the question “do you not know” six times. This infers that they should have known these things. “Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? do you not know that we shall judge angels?” (ver. 2, 3). Why was it important that they know this? Not knowing these things was affecting their life as a church. They were going to law with one another before a worldly court. Paul states this was a shame and a defeat in the church. Only when we know the Scriptures and live by them can we avoid entanglements with the world. “Do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?” (ver. 9). Paul lists those whom he calls “unrighteous”: “fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, effeminate, homosexuals, thieves, covetousness, drunkards, revilers and swindlers.” Sadly too many of these “unrighteous” people are not only a part of our churches, but many are also leaders. David Bercot stated it well in *The Kingdom That Turned The World Upside Down*: “Either a person’s heart is entirely devoted to God’s kingdom, or it is devoted to the kingdoms of this world. We can’t have a divided heart or serve two masters.” Evidently some of the Corinthians did not know this. The next three times Paul asks this question, it has to do with our physical bodies and immorality. “Do you not know your bodies are members of Christ?” (ver 15); “Do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body with her?” (ver 16); “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God and you are not your own?” (ver 19). Evidently some of the Corinthians, like many today, did not know the reality of the fact that our bodies are members of Christ and we are indwelt, in our physical bodies by the Holy Spirit, and this is to determine the course of our actions, not only concerning immorality but every facet of our lives. He stated this in II Corinthians 12:20, 21: “For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there may be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputed, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced.” When the church ignores the presence of the Holy Spirit in individual lives immorality and every evil sin flourishes.

The Apostle uses the term “do you not know?” two times in Romans 6 in answer to the question: “how shall we who died to sin live in it?” (ver 2) He asks: “do you not know” then answers the question in verses 3-11. Because they did not know, they were advancing the idea that a Christian could continue sinning and the grace of God would take care of it. He then asks, “shall we continue in sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” and answers this question in verses 16-23. These passages show that it is important to know what the Scripture says about sin and grace. At this point we can paraphrase Paul’s statement in Romans 10:14, 15: “How shall they know if they do not hear and how shall they hear without a preacher?” Just how much is preached in our churches today concerning sin and grace? How much Scripture is actually taught in churches? Why are so many of our pulpits today filled with so many want-to-be-psychologists and entertainers? Why do most Christians and many preachers say we cannot know and understand the Bible? Perhaps if our Bible Colleges, Seminaries, and preachers would

major on the Bible and less on contemporary worship and church administration we would see a difference in the church's knowledge and understanding of the Bible. Stephen Prothero, author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know – And Doesn't*, wrote: "U.S. citizens know almost nothing about the Bible. Although most regard it as the word of God, few read it anymore. Even evangelicals from the Bible Belt seem more focused on loving Jesus than on learning what he had to say. In a religious literacy quiz I have administered to undergraduates for the last two years, students tell me that Moses was blinded on the road to Damascus and Paul led the Israelites on their exodus out of Egypt. Surveys that are scientific have found that only one of three U.S. citizens is able to name the four Gospels, and one of ten think that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. No wonder pollster George Gallup has concluded that the United States is 'a nation of biblical illiterates.'"

To the Ephesians who had been "blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (1:3), were "chosen to be blameless, were predestined to adoption (1:4,5), and had the Holy Spirit and a promise of inheritance" (1:10,14), Paul prays for them that "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe, which is in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised him from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenlies." (ver. 14-18). To the Colossians he wrote: "we have not ceased to pray for you to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (ver. 9, 10). Paul's prayer is that they might be *enlightened* and *know* and *have knowledge* of these things which will guide and enrich their lives.

Does the church today need any less this enlightening and knowledge? And where shall they learn it if it is not taught in the Bible Colleges and Seminaries and not preached by the preachers? It appears that our culture has penetrated our seminaries and churches with skeptics in both the pulpit as well as the pew. Many who proclaim to be Christians doubt the absolute truthfulness of the Scriptures. Yet it is from within its pages we are schooled about the teachings and messages of Jesus and the Apostles which are to govern our daily lives and worship.

We noted the mysteries in Scripture and showed they have been revealed and we can understand them, but there are mysteries today that no devoted Christian can understand. One of them is: with the national landscape spotted with sprawling religious facilities, many of them "mega-churches" and on any given Sunday thousands of people flock to these facilities where church attendance is at an all time high, why are we witnessing so much evil and debauchery in our land? With all the religious activity in America today, why is David Wells in: *No Place for Truth* so right when he states: "America is a violent and disturbed country. Its teenagers have the highest suicide rate in the world (in the last decade, more teenage boys died from gunshot wounds than from

all natural causes combined); it leads the world in the consumption of drugs, legal and illegal, in addictions of various kinds, in divorce, in the incidence of depressive illness, and in the marketing of a vast range of therapies to counteract these problems, all of which points to a vast underlying unhappiness." If Christians took the Bible seriously and preachers preached the Scriptures instead of entertaining their audience, we might have some answers to this mystery.

Why is it necessary for Christians to know and understand the Bible? Because not knowing and understanding can be fatal. Long ago God told Hosea the prophet: "My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge, because you have rejected knowledge, I will reject you..." (Hosea 4:6) Jesus said: "And this is eternal life that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3). It is only by knowing God (as revealed in the Bible) that we can have eternal life. We spend our energies reading books, visiting therapist, attending self help sessions, and attending seminars trying to acquire what is a by-product of knowing God.

II Thessalonians 1 states that retribution will be dealt out "to those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (ver. 8). It is only in knowing the Bible that we can know God and not having this knowledge will lead to rejection and destruction. Jesus expected his hearers to not only hear but understand. "He called the multitude and said to them 'Hear and understand'." (Matt. 15:10).

The Gentiles were condemned because they "refused to have God in their knowledge" (Rom. 1:28). This passage clearly shows what happens to a people, whether it is an individual, a church, or a nation, that leaves God out of their reckoning. They bring judgment upon themselves when they give no place to the God revealed in Scripture. When God is banished from life or is neglected, they become a certain kind of person and in these verses following verse 28 is the most terrible description of the kind of person they become.

It was only after Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading and "began at the same Scripture (Isaiah 53) and preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:30-35) that the Ethiopian Eunuch understood enough to obey the Lord. Becoming a Christian is more than joining a fellowship and attending some sort of service every week. It is "understanding what you are reading" if you are reading at all.

What is the difficulty in knowing and understanding the Bible? Here, briefly, are a few reasons: 1. Admittedly there are some passages hard to understand (11 Pet. 3:16) but this does not say they can't be understood. 2. The wisdom of the world: (I Cor. 2:5) leaves no time for the wisdom of God. 3. Spiritual blindness: (II Cor. 4:4) "The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel." 4. Tradition: (Mark 7:8, 9) "Neglecting the command of God, you hold to the tradition of men. You set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition." 5. No desire to do His will: Jesus said in John 7:17: "If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from myself." SELAH