

A source of Our Confidence

The Word of God

The Authority of Scripture

The Clarity of Scripture

The Necessity of Scripture

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Wednesday Noon Bible Study
FOLHOW Prayer Line

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What Does Scripture Say About Confidence?

Part I



The second pillar upon which we find confidence for the Holy Scriptures is the clarity in which the scriptures present the truths of God. **Clarity is not the same as simplicity**, and not all texts are as simple and straightforward as others. Yet **in the context of the whole of Scripture** and greater familiarity with the whole, we can be **confident** that Scripture speaks clearly. This understanding is reinforced by comparing more difficult texts with the simpler texts and comparing parallel passages (similar stories or accounts of people, places, and events) also increases understanding of the Divine messages and instructions within the scriptures. Additionally, those who come to the written Word of God with faith in the goodness of God, with a humble heart, prayerfully, a willingness to repent, and a desire to obey the Word He has given us, will come to understand the Holy Writ.

Anyone who has begun to read the Bible seriously will realize that some parts can be understood very easily while other parts seem puzzling. In fact, very early in the history of the church Peter reminded his readers that some parts of Paul's epistles were difficult to understand:

Remember that we are saved because our Lord is patient. Our dear brother Paul told you the same thing when he wrote to you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes about this in all his letters. Some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand, and people who are ignorant and weak in faith explain these things falsely. They also falsely explain the other Scriptures, but they are destroying themselves by doing this." (II Peter 3: 15 – 16 New Century Version).

Not all parts of Scripture are able to be understood easily. But **it would be a mistake to think that most of Scripture or Scripture in general is difficult to understand**. The Old Testament and New Testament frequently affirm that Scripture is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by ordinary believers. When read in context, Peter's statement above is an urge to read and understand the teachings of Paul's letter. Peter's readers had read and understood (II Peter 3: 15) the writings of Paul. In this passage, Peter assigns moral blame to those who twisted these passages "to their own destruction" and he does not say that there are things impossible to understand, but that sometimes there are areas of the scripture that are difficult to understand. Yet Paul placed the fault with false teachers for misusing these areas to their temporary advantage yet personal destruction.



Perspicuity – The Doctrine of Clarity

The doctrine of perspicuity (pur-spi-kyoo-i-tee), the clarity of Scripture, is that the central **message of the Bible is clear and understandable, and that the Bible itself can be properly interpreted in a normal, literal sense**). This has been a cornerstone of evangelical belief ever since the Reformation. Belief in the perspicuity of the Bible is ancient, going back to Jesus himself. It was He who reproached the scribes and Pharisees for not understanding the plain meaning of the text. The perspicuity of Scripture was based on the principle that its basic teachings were clear, and that those parts of it which were harder to understand were to be interpreted in the light of the clearer passages. In ancient times, this meant that passages such as the parables of Jesus were to be interpreted according to the plain teaching found elsewhere in the New Testament.



The Bible Frequently Affirms Its Own Clarity

The Bible's clarity and the responsibility of believers generally to read it and understand it are often emphasized in the scriptures. In a very familiar passage, Moses tells the people of Israel:

... and you are to love *ADONAI* your God with all your heart, all your being and all your resources. These words, which I am ordering you today, are to be on your heart; and you are to teach them carefully to your children. You are to talk about them when you sit at home, when you are traveling on the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy. 6: 5 – 7 Complete Jewish Bible)

All the people of Israel *were expected to be able to understand the words of Scripture well enough to be able to “teach them diligently” to their children*. This teaching would not have consisted merely of rote memorization devoid of understanding, for *the people of Israel were to discuss the words of Scripture during their activities of sitting in the house or walking or going to bed or getting up in the morning. God expected that all of his people would know and be able to talk about his Word, with proper application to ordinary situations in life*.

Similarly, Psalm 1 tells us that the **blessed [fortunate, prosperous, and favored by God] is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked [following their advice and example], Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit [down to rest] in the seat of scoffers (ridiculers). But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And on His law [His precepts and teachings] he [habitually] meditates day and night.** (Psalm1: 1-2 Amplified Bible). This daily meditation assumes an ability to understand Scripture rightly on the part of those who meditate.

The character of Scripture is said to be such that **even the “simple” can understand it rightly and be made wise by it.**

“The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple; ⁸The statutes of the LORD *are* right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD *is* pure, **enlightening the eyes**” (Psalm 19: 7-8 New King James Version).

Again, we read, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it **imparts understanding to the simple**” (Psalm 119: 130). Here the **“simple” person (Hebrew - peti) is not merely one who lacks intellectual ability, but one who lacks sound judgment, who is prone to making mistakes, and who is easily led astray.** 1 God’s Word is so understandable, so clear, that even this kind of person is made wise by it. No believer should think himself or herself too foolish to read Scripture and understand it sufficiently to be made wise by it.

There is a similar emphasis in the New Testament. Jesus himself, in his teachings, his conversations, and his disputes, never responds to any questions with a hint of blaming the Old Testament Scriptures for being unclear. Even while speaking to first-century people who were

removed from David by 1,000 years, from Moses by about 1,500 years, and from Abraham by about 2,000 years, Jesus still assumes that such people are able to read and rightly to understand the Old Testament Scriptures. Whether he was speaking to scholars or common people, the responses of Jesus always assume that the blame for **misunderstanding any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but on those who misunderstand or failed to accept what is written.** Repeatedly, Jesus answers questions with statements like:

“Have you not read . . .” (Matthew. 12: 3, 5; 19: 14; 22: 31),

“Have you never read in the scriptures . . .” (Matthew. 21: 42),

“You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.”

(Matthew 22: 29; Matthew. 9: 13; 12: 7; 15: 3; 21: 13; John 3: 10



New Testament Epistles

Also, remember that most of the New Testament epistles are written not to church leaders but to entire congregations. Paul writes, “To the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians. 1: 2), “To the churches of Galatia” (Galatians. 1: 2), “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Philippians. 1: 1), and so forth. Paul assumes that his hearers will understand what he writes, and he encourages the sharing of his letters with other churches: “And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea” (Colossians. 4: 16; also, John 20: 30 – 31; II Corinthians. 1: 13; Ephesians 3: 4; I Timothy 4: 13; James 1: 1, 22 – 25; I Peter 1: 1; 2: 2; II Peter 1: 19; I John 5: 13). II Peter 1: 20 may be urged against the view of the clarity of Scripture explained in this chapter. The verse says, “no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation,” and someone may claim that this means that ordinary believers are unable to interpret Scripture rightly for themselves. It is unlikely, however, that this implication

should be drawn from 2 Peter 1: 20, for the verse is probably discussing the origin and not the interpretation of Scripture. Thus, the NIV translates it, “no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation.”

Furthermore, even if the verse were understood as speaking of interpreting Scripture, it would be saying that the interpretation of Scripture must be done within the fellowship of believers and not merely as a personal activity. It still would not imply that authoritative interpreters are needed to ascertain the true meaning of Scripture, but simply that reading and understanding Scripture should not be carried out entirely in isolation from other Christians. Lest we think that understanding the Bible was somehow easier for first-century Christians than for us, it is important to realize that in many instances the New Testament epistles were written to churches that had large proportions of Gentile Christians. They were relatively new Christians who had no previous background in any kind of Christian society, and who had little or no prior understanding of the history and culture of Israel. Nevertheless, the New Testament authors show no hesitancy in expecting even these Gentile Christians to be able to read a translation of the Old Testament in their own language and to understand it rightly (cf. Rom. 4: 1 – 25; 15: 4; I Corinthians 10: 1 – 11; II Timothy 3: 16 – 17).



The Moral and Spiritual Qualities Needed for Right Understanding

The New Testament writers frequently state that the ability to understand Scripture rightly is more a moral and spiritual than intellectual ability: “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts (literally “things”) of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (I Corinthians 2: 14; cf. 1: 18 – 3: 4; II Corinthians 3: 14 – 16; 4: 3 – 4, 6; Hebrews 5: 14; James 1: 5 – 6; II Peter 3: 5; Mark 4: 11 – 12; John 7: 17; 8: 43). Thus, although the **New Testament authors affirm that the Bible in itself is written clearly, they also affirm that it will not be understood rightly by those who are unwilling to receive its teachings.** Scripture is able to be **understood by all unbelievers who**

will read it sincerely seeking salvation, and by all believers who will read it while seeking God's help in understanding it. This is because in both cases the Holy Spirit is at work overcoming the effects of sin, which otherwise will make the truth appear to be foolish (1 Cor. 2: 14; 1: 18 – 25; James 1: 5 – 6, 22 – 25).



Definition of the Clarity of Scripture

We can affirm that the Bible is written in such a way that all things necessary for our salvation and for our Christian life and growth are very clearly set forth in Scripture. In a day when it is common for people to tell us how hard it is to interpret Scripture rightly, we would do well to remember that not once in the Gospels do we ever hear Jesus saying anything like this: “I see how your problem arose—the Scriptures are not very clear on that subject.” Instead, whether He is speaking to scholars or untrained common people, his responses always assume that the blame for misunderstanding any teaching of Scripture is not to be placed on the Scriptures themselves, but on those who misunderstand or fail to accept what is written.

Again, and again, He answers questions with statements like, “Have you not read . . .” (Matthew. 12: 3, 5; 19: 14; 22: 31), “Have you never read in the scriptures . . .” (Matthew 21: 42), or even, “You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matthew 22: 29; Matthew 9: 13; 12: 7; 15: 3; 21: 13; John 3: 10; and other scriptures.). Similarly, most of the New Testament epistles are written not to church leaders but to entire congregations. Paul writes, “To the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians. 1: 2), “To the churches of Galatia” (Galatian 1: 2), “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Philippians 1: 1), and so forth. Paul assumes that his hearers will understand what he writes, and he encourages the sharing of his letters with other churches: “And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea” (Colossians 4: 16; John 20: 30 – 31; II Corinthians 1: 13; Ephesians. 3: 4; I Timothy 4: 13; James 1: 1, 22 – 25; I Peter 1: 1; 2: 2;

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Definition of the Clarity of Scripture

In order to summarize this biblical material, we can affirm that the Bible is written in such a way that all things necessary for our salvation and for our Christian life and growth are very clearly set forth in Scripture. Although theologians have sometimes defined the clarity of Scripture more narrowly (by saying, for example, only that Scripture is clear in teaching the way of salvation), the many texts cited above apply to many different aspects of biblical teaching and do not seem to support any such limitation on the areas to which Scripture can be said to speak clearly. It seems more faithful to those biblical texts to define the clarity of Scripture as follows: The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God’s help and being willing to follow it. Once we have stated this, however, we must also recognize that many people, even God’s people, do in fact misunderstand Scripture.

Why Do People Misunderstand Scripture?

During Jesus’ lifetime, his own disciples at times failed to understand the Old Testament and Jesus’ own teachings (see Matthew 15: 16; Mark 4: 10 – 13; 6: 52; 8: 14 – 21; 9: 32; Luke 18: 34; John 8: 27; 10: 6). Although sometimes this was due to the fact that they simply needed to wait

for further events in the history of redemption, and especially in the life of Christ himself (see John 12: 16; 13: 7; John 2: 22), there were also times when this was due to their own lack of faith or hardness of heart (Luke 24: 25).

Furthermore, there were times in the early church when Christians did not understand or agree on the teachings of the Old Testament or about the letters written by the apostles. The process of growth in understanding concerning the implications of Gentile inclusion in the church (culminating in “much debate” [Acts 15: 7] in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15), or Peter’s misunderstanding of this issue in Galatians 2: 11 – 15, or the frequent doctrinal and ethical issues that had to be corrected by the New Testament epistles. In fact, throughout the history of the church, doctrinal disagreements have been many, and progress in resolving doctrinal differences has often been slow. In order to help people to avoid making mistakes in interpreting Scripture, many Bible teachers have developed “principles of interpretation,” or guidelines to encourage growth in the skill of proper interpretation.



The existence of many disagreements about the meaning of Scripture throughout history reminds us that the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture does not imply or suggest that all believers will agree on all the teachings of Scripture. Nevertheless, it does tell us something very important— that the problem always lies not with Scripture but with ourselves. The situation is in fact similar to that of the authority of Scripture. Whereas we affirm that the words of Scripture have all the authority of God himself, we also realize that many people do not acknowledge that authority or submit themselves to it. Similarly, we affirm that all the teachings of Scripture are clear and able to be understood, but we also recognize that people often (through their own shortcomings) misunderstand what is clearly written in Scripture.



Though the Bible may not seem large in comparison with the vast number of books and other writings in the world, the Bible is a **priceless treasure of wisdom from God that surpasses in value and purpose all the other books that have ever been or will be written**. Every student of the bible who deeply loves God’s Word understands the endless newness of scripture and that there is much more in Scripture than any one person can be learn in one lifetime!

The role of teaching God’s Word also at times involves correcting false teachings and one must be able not only “to give instruction in sound doctrine” but also “to refute those who contradict it” (Titus 1: 9, “correcting his opponents with gentleness” II Timothy 2: 25; Titus 2: 7 – 8).

A Seed – God’s Word-Our Confidence

A perfect parable regarding our confidence in the clarity of scripture is embedded in the Book of Luke Chapter 8 in the Parable of the Sower. We are reminded that God's Word is like a **seed**. The **Word of God** takes time to grow in our hearts and impact our lives. Our confidence comes from not just hearing the Word and reading the Word, but also believing the Word is in fact from God. Our confidence is strengthened as we also witness the power of God through Holy Spirit to change our hearts and our lives. As we not only hear the Word and learn the Word but also permit the words of God to change our lives and the lives of those around us, change takes place. It is the clarity that God, Himself, through Holy Spirit, renews, refreshes, heals, transforms our questions and doubts to surety and confidence!



Therefore, think about it...

1. If the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture is true, why does there seem to be so much disagreement among Christians about the teaching of the Bible? Observing the diversity of interpretations of Scripture, some conclude, "People can make the Bible say anything they want." How do you think Jesus would respond to this statement?
2. What would happen to the church if most believers gave up reading the Bible for themselves and only listened to Bible teachers or read books about the Bible? If you thought that only expert scholars could understand the Bible rightly, what would happen to your personal reading of Scripture? Has this already happened to some extent in your life or in the lives of those you know?
3. Do you think that there are right and wrong interpretations of most or all passages of Scripture? If you thought the Bible was generally unclear, how would your answer change? Will a conviction about the clarity of Scripture affect the care you use when studying a text of Scripture? Will it affect the way you approach Scripture when trying to gain a biblical answer to some difficult doctrinal or moral problem?
4. If even seminary professors disagree about some Bible teaching, can other Christians ever hope to come to a correct decision on that teaching? (Give reasons for your answer.) Do you think ordinary people among the Jews at the time of Jesus had a hard time deciding whether to believe Jesus or the scholarly experts who disagreed with him? Did Jesus expect them to be able to decide?

5. Does the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture mean that the New Testament can be fully understood by people who do not have access to an Old Testament?

Resources:

The Holy Bible – Different translations

The Great Doctrines of the Bible, The Doctrine of the Scriptures -Williams Evans

Systematic Theology – Wayne Grudem