

CHALLENGING QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Lesson 1

Understanding the Bible

This week, we begin a study I've titled "Challenging Questions People Ask". All of the questions we'll study come from real life questions I've been asked, including those you submitted over the past three months. My prayer is that you'll find this study meaningful and that it will help your walk with Christ grow stronger and add new depth to your understanding of God, his son Jesus, and God's plan for you.

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

I've posted a preliminary list of the questions we'll be studying on the website, www.daniel222.com, if you'd like a preview of the lessons in this study. There have been other questions sent to me since I posted that list, but it will give you an idea of the study we're about to undertake. I'm also excited in that God is leading me to follow this study with a survey of the Old Testament. Going through it over six months or so, God will take us across the breadth and depth of the Old Testament and add new meaning and relevance to us as we study. If you struggle with understanding the Old Testament, this will be a study you'll not want to miss.



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

Here's the question:

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

For this week then, let's consider this heartfelt set of questions.

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

1. Who else struggled with reading and understanding the Book of Isaiah? (Acts 8:26-34)
2. What happened that allowed him to understand the book?
3. What did he ask in Acts 8:31?

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

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

4. What does Peter tell us about this in 2 Peter 3:15-16?

From Peter's words then, we can take heart that if even the Apostles were challenged by understanding God's Word, we are no less Christian, no less faithful, if we do not understand all of it either.

We therefore need to see that our understanding will only come from God and in God's time. There are some things we can see in God's Word that speak to how we can improve our understanding of how to study, so that when God speaks to us we'll get the most benefit from it.

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

6. Considering Romans 10:17, from what does faith come?

7. And finally, God again shows us something important in Proverbs 2:1-6. What do we need to do, according to this passage, is to seek Him like we were looking for silver, or hidden treasure; and where does our understanding come from if we do?

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

8. What did Jesus tell us to do in Matthew 7:7?

And finally, a few comments specifically related to our struggles with reading and understanding God's Word: We need to understand that each of us learn differently. That one resource or method for study may not work for everyone. Some of us are readers with high comprehension; and some aren't visual at all but are auditory -- that is, they learn through hearing or listening. This is particularly true for people who can't read, or have reading difficulty. Furthermore, we've all not had the same learning experiences. A seminary student is exposed to a completely different set of resources and ways of thinking on something than someone who was not able to graduate high school. It doesn't mean the one person is "smarter" than the other, but rather their experiences have been different.

What this means to each of us is that we'll need to ask God to lead us to find those one or two things that will help us gain a better understanding of His Word. I've been blessed with how God has used my limitations to help my understanding of Him and His plan for my life, and I know He'll do the same for you. Let me say that as we saw with the Eunuch and Peter the Apostle, everyone struggles with the challenges of understanding scripture -- everyone.

There are a couple of things I've learned over time that might help you as well: In addition to the normal list of study resources you can probably imagine, I have a fairly good-sized library of reference material accumulated over the years.

And yet, in the end, my main book for study and lesson preparation is God's Word. I hold the view that if God has sent His Holy Spirit to live in my life and teach me, then the Bible is the place to be. So as I study, I'm always asking God to show me what He'd have me learn – not necessarily what the meaning of a verse is from an intellectual perspective, but what is God trying to teach me by having me study a particular passage.

Secondly, I've come to understand you can read the Bible for two basic reasons: to find "information" or to find "inspiration"; so understanding your reason for reading the Bible will also help you with your understanding. It also helped me see that each time we read a passage we don't have to have a complete intellectual understanding of it or the book that contains it. For example, when reading something out of 1 Kings or II Kings, I don't need to get hung up on understanding all those kings and which kingdom they were associated with. Instead, I can look at the general theme in that passage -- rebellion against God, pride, a desire to be one's own god and the destruction that that brings -- That's what I need to see there.

A third thing I began doing after taking a Precept Study (one of Kay Arthur's studies), is underlining a word or phrase that surfaces a lot in a specific passage. When you do, the focus required to find and underline these words or phrases helps you begin to understand the meaning, or at least the importance of a word or phrase in that passage. For example, in Isaiah, underline everywhere you see a word or reference to "redeemer", "redeemed", "savior" "salvation", and similar words. You'll quickly notice that this is a book about redemption and about God's role as our only redeemer.

A fourth thing I'll do as I read is: when a verse or verses really speak to me, I'll grab an index card and take the time to write that verse or verses out on the card so I can put it in the car with me and memorize it as I drive or sit in traffic. It really adds to my understanding.

And one last thing I enjoy is listening to the Bible. I have the Bible on CD, a theatrical version -- it comes with sound effects etc. -- and during my long commute each day, I'll spend some of that time listening to God's Word, so that in a typical year I can listen through the entire Bible. Quite often, something I didn't see in the reading, I'll pick up in the listening. It's another way to really help in your understanding, particularly if you struggle with understanding through reading.

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

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

In Christ,

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