

THUS SAITH THE LORD

A STUDY OF GOD'S WORD

Illumination – How Can We Understand What God Wrote?

The good news of what we have studied so far is that God's Word has come to us. God has revealed His truth, both generally and specially. That special revelation was then written down by inspired authors, collected throughout the centuries into a collection of books that is totally true and without error. The bad news is that we can't understand it. That might seem like an odd statement, but it is the clear teaching of the authors of Scripture. God's message of truth goes out to the nations, and by and large the nations reject it. Fortunately, God does not leave us in a hopeless state. He sends the Spirit to open our eyes to our need for Christ, and after we accept Christ He continues working to open our eyes to the meaning of what the Bible says.

Because the Bible is both a divine book and a human book, then understanding it means 1) we will need God's help to truly understand it and 2) we will also need to study it carefully. Many people fall into the trap of either ignoring the need of the Holy Spirit or the opposite error of ignoring the importance of careful study. This week we will be focusing on studying the Bible in light of the fact that it is a divine book, and therefore we need God's help. Next week we will study how it is that we should study the Bible as a book written by men, and the need for using careful principles of interpretation.

What would happen if someone put all the emphasis on the Holy Spirit and failed to acknowledge the need of careful study in understanding God's Word?

What would happen if someone put all the emphasis on the careful study of God's Word and failed to acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in understanding God's Word?

Which do you feel is the more common error of the two?

The Need for Illumination

Little children are famous for telling you they don't need your help when, in fact, they most definitely do need your help. It's tempting when we pick up our Bibles to have the same attitude – that we can read and understand on our own what God has written. It's tempting to believe that when it comes to God's Word, we don't need any help. But there are at least two reasons why we need the help of the Spirit.

Illumination is necessary because of the Creator-creature divide (1 Corinthians 2:6-14).

The Bible reminds us that God's ways are not our ways, because as the heaven is higher than the earth, so is God's way thinking so much higher than our way of thinking (Isaiah 55:9). When we are dealing with God, we are dealing with someone who is far greater than us and far beyond our natural ability to comprehend. Paul discusses the importance of having the Spirit in understanding God's wisdom. On our own, we would not be able to understand how God thinks and operates. He must guide us so that we can grasp what it is that He is doing, has done, and will do. God cannot be exhaustively known, but He can be truly known. Yet even our knowledge of God must come with God's own help.

Illumination is necessary because of the fall (Romans 1:18ff).

Man's fall into sin did more than make innocent people guilty. The fall made whole people broken. The fall impacted every part of us – our hearts, our minds, and our wills. Our hearts now desire that which is twisted and wrong. Our wills now choose that which we know is wrong. And our thoughts are likewise broken and not able to function properly.¹ We can't reason rightly, because we want certain things to be true and don't want other things to be true. As much as we might like to think of ourselves as neutral machines, simply taking in data and spitting out the most logical conclusion, we are much more moldable in our thinking than we would like to admit.

Can you think of examples, perhaps personal ones, where people thought or argued for something illogical because they wanted it to be true? [note: it's easy to think of unbelievers doing this, but challenge your table to think of ways in which they or other Christians have been guilty of this]

Paul describes this process in vivid imagery when talking about the unbeliever's rejection of truth in Romans 1:18ff. People willfully reject God's truth and exchange it for a lie because they don't *want* it to be true and they don't *want* to listen to God. While that is true for unbelievers, sadly it remains the case too often for believers as well. This means that we need God's help in understanding what He wrote, because our natural inclination is to reject God's truth, especially if we don't like it.

¹ Theologians refer to this as the "noetic [noh-eh-tick] effect" of the fall. The word noetic comes from the Greek word *nous*, which refers to the mind. The noetic effect means that our minds have been negatively impacted by the fall.

Illumination and the Unbeliever

Before our salvation, illumination is needed to open our eyes so that we can see our need of Christ and the gospel. This refers both to the meaning of the gospel, as well as to the personal urgency to accept what God's Word says.

The State of the Unbeliever

Before someone comes to Christ for salvation they are unable to understand what God's Word teaches. Christ illustrates this principle vividly when He states while discussing His parables, "they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not..." (Matthew 13:13). Those without any help of the Spirit have rejected the truth that is available to them (Romans 1:21, 25), and as a result they cannot truly understand what God's Word says.

What are some of the ways the Bible describes the thinking of those who have not been saved?

- **Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools (Romans 1:22)**
- **Blinded by Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4)**
- **Darkened in their understanding (Ephesians 4:18; Romans 1:21)**

The Hope for the Unbeliever

Fortunately, all is not lost for those who do not know Christ. Scriptures tell us that God is able to open the eyes of the blind both physically speaking as well as spiritually speaking. Satan might have blinded the eyes of unbelievers, but the God who spoke light into existence can speak light into the hearts of those who are in darkness (2 Corinthians 2:4-6). This is done, not by cunning or craftiness on our part, but based on the simple message of Jesus Christ. Although this message is foolish to the world (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Before there had been a veil that

kept them from understanding, whereas now there is a full understanding (2 Corinthians 3:12-17).

How should this understanding of illumination impact our evangelism?

Illumination and the Believer

While there is a difference between the condition of the believer and the unbeliever, both groups have the same problem: they need the Spirit's help to understand what God's Word says. In this section, we will look at what it means for a believer to experience illumination and then conclude by talking about how we should respond to the doctrine of illumination.

Understanding Illumination

Illumination is a word that is often thrown around but can easily be misunderstood. Illumination is the Spirit of God working with already revealed truth to bring out the meaning and the importance of the Bible. Each part of this definition is worth looking at further.

- **Illumination involves revealed truth.**

Illumination and revelation are two concepts that are often confused. Revelation is when God gives reveals truth. When God spoke to Moses or Elijah or Paul, that was revelation. Illumination is when God allows people to *understand* what He has already *revealed*. Illumination does not give new truth, rather it helps us understand God's already revealed truth.

Why is it important to emphasize that illumination does mean new revelation?

When the Bible was finished and the canon was complete, God's new revelation stopped. We still have, however, God's revelation recorded for us in Scripture. While revelation stopped, illumination continues throughout the whole history of the church. Illumination is ongoing, whereas special revelation was completed. We could say that God has revealed, and that He is illuminating.

- **Illumination means we can understand the meaning of God's Word**

The main meaning of illumination is that the Holy Spirit "illuminates" or brings to light the meaning of Scripture. Jesus predicted this would be the result of the coming of the Spirit (John 16:12-14). That coming of the Spirit guides believers into knowing what is true and what is false, especially when they are faced with false teachers. In 1 John 2:20, 27 we read that an anointing from the Holy One (KJV has "unction" in verse 20, but it is the same Greek word for anointing in verse 27) guides the believers into all truth. The help of the Holy Spirit enables to know what it is that God teaches us.

A couple of challenging questions come up as we consider this teaching. ***First, if illumination involves means God Himself helps us understand His Word, why is it that two equally godly people can study God's Word and come to different conclusions about what it means, sometimes in areas that matter significantly (i.e., baptism, end times, etc.)?*** It's important to realize at this point that illumination does not guarantee that we will get every doctrine right.

A second important question is ***can an unbeliever understand God's Word at all if they are not saved?*** After all, unsaved people grow up in churches, abandon the faith, and yet can spit back the Romans road and explain how to get saved, sometimes even

leading others to the Lord in the process! First, God doesn't give the same help to unbelievers to understand what is being said as He does to believers. Many unbelievers read the Bible and struggle to really understand what is being said, and don't have the same opportunity to ask the indwelling Spirit what this challenging passage is asking.

But second, it's important to remember Christianity is not an illogical faith. Someone with the ability to reason can understand the concepts of what is being claimed by the Bible. They will, however, not find themselves persuaded of the truth of them or will find what the Bible teaches to be ridiculous. For example, Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 about the wisdom of God and the Spirit of God is not teaching that there are deep, mystical truths that no one can get unless they somehow have a secret knowledge. Rather, he is saying that God's plan of salvation to have the Jewish Messiah killed on a Roman cross is a message the world finds ridiculous, except for those who have been given God's perspective and are willing to receive God's understanding. He is arguing that the world doesn't want to accept God's way of living, rather they are repulsed by it. This leads us into our final point...

- **Illumination means we understand the importance of God's Word**

Illumination often means a "lightbulb" moment where something that didn't make sense before makes sense now. But illumination can also mean that we look at the teaching of God's Word and we suddenly realize that it's true, real, and that it's true and real *for us*. Paul would often pray for the churches that he had planted, and often his prayer would revolve around a greater understanding of what God had done for them in Christ (Ephesians 1:17-19; 3:14-19). Such a knowledge goes beyond the mere facts of what happened, although those are important, but

includes a deeper appreciation and comprehension of what God's revelation means for me.

Have you ever had a time when you read something or heard a message, and a truth or a passage you had known for a long time suddenly felt very important and relevant to your life at that moment?

For the unbeliever, this means realizing the need of salvation. But for the believer, this could be any number of ways in which God takes His truth and presses its message home to the listener. It might mean a behavior that needs to change, a promise that needs to be claimed, or a hope that needs to be believed. The Holy Spirit can bring out the life of Scripture into our lives when we most need it.

Responding to Illumination

So if this is all true, what does it mean for the believer? How should our knowledge of illumination change the way we read the Bible? Doctrine needs to be accurate, but it should also be practical. Truth about God that doesn't change the way we think and live is missing the point (cf Titus 1:1).

Read with Humility

When we read our Bibles, we should have a certain humility about our understanding. We need God's help to truly understand what a passage is saying and what it means for me today. Beginning a sermon or a time of private Bible reading with a simple prayer asking for God's help should not just be a formality. It should be an honest evaluation of my own inability on my own to comprehend what God is teaching and a humble cry of dependence on God. As James would put it, we should receive God's Word with meekness (James 1:21), which ought to include realizing we need God's help to study God's Word.

Why is it sometimes easy to forget that we need God's help in our private reading of His Word?

Read with Hope

When we read our Bibles “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). This is an incredible reality! When we come to study God’s Word, we get to ask the author at any time what a passage means. Even the most educated need God’s help, and even the most uneducated are promised God’s help! You don’t need college or seminary degrees to understand what God is saying. Although pastors and teachers were given to help understand the Word (cf Ephesians 4:11-12), you aren’t completely dependent on others to know God. When you go to read, you can read in confidence that will humble dependence and hard work you can understand what it is that God wants you to know from His Word.

Illumination is an important element of Bible study, but as we stated at the beginning, it’s half the story. The Bible is a divine-human book. Because the Bible is divine, it means we need the help of the Spirit to understand it. Because it is human, we must do the necessary work of interpreting it. Next week we will study what it looks like to do our part and interpret God’s Word carefully.

Definition: The work of the Spirit in bringing out the meaning and the importance of God’s previous revelation in Scripture.