

Understanding the Bible - Part 1

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Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0 : 0 0] Let me pray and then we'll come to the material that we've got for our time together this evening. Let me pray. Father, we want to ask just now for your help. We're perhaps tired. We've done lots of different things today and we want this time together to be useful for us.

And so we pray for the help of your spirit as we look together at your words, even as we think about how we understand the Bible. May we not just do that as a kind of dry exercise, but may we, as we work hard at trying to understand your word properly, might that expose us to what you actually say to us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

So it's a little experimental the next two Sunday evenings, but experiments can sometimes be huge successes, can't they? And sometimes abject failures when we will work out together which one it is over the next couple of weeks.

But I've decided that what I thought might be helpful for us is to think a little bit about how we go about understanding the Bible. So what are we doing as we read the Bible and seek to understand what the point is for us that we're supposed to be hearing and listening together?

And lots of the material comes from this little book called Dig Deeper. Anyone read this book, Dig Deeper? No one's read this book? Yes, Simeon's read this book. You can go home, Simeon, if you like. I mean, yeah.

[1 : 3 0] So this is a really helpful little book, and if you want to borrow it, you can either borrow my copy or you can borrow Simeon's copy. He would gladly lend it to you. I found it really helpful. And so lots of it comes from there.

And really, he begins his book, so I'm just going to steal his opening illustration. He begins his book by imagining a small group Bible study. Bible study goes something like this. The leader asks a question.

He says, we're looking at verse whatever it is. What do you think that verse means? And the first person says, well, yeah, I kind of think it means this.

And they talk for a little bit about what they think it means. And then another person says, well, I know that it means that to you, but to me it means exactly the opposite.

And they say something contradictory to what the first person said. And the Bible study leader goes, well, you know, thank you very much for both sharing your ideas. Let's move on to the next verse. And it's a really sort of dissatisfying experience, isn't it?

[2 : 3 2] Because actually, it's a bad Bible study. Because the Bible doesn't say different things to different people. We've been in conversations like that.

And it's not a good Bible study. Because the Bible, the meaning of the Bible doesn't lie in the impressions of the reader, but in the intent of the author. And so whilst we might not always get it perfectly right, our process of understanding the Bible should mean that we are circling closer and closer in on what God's intention was as he wrote it.

So the Bible isn't saying mutually contradictory things to different people. And the author is not confused. I think, obviously, this has become more challenging. It's the whole idea of meaning in text has been challenged at various different levels by different people.

Now, before we move on, let me just try and impress upon you how important this task is. What do you think is the scariest verse in the Bible?

I'm sure there are many scary verses in the Bible, but I think you could make a pretty good case for Matthew 4, verse 6, being one of the scariest verses in the Bible. In Matthew 4, verse 6, the devil quotes the Bible to Jesus in an attempt to lure him into sin, which Jesus then resists by quoting the Bible back to him.

[3 : 57] But the implication is that it is possible to be lured into sin by mishandling or misunderstanding or misapplying the Bible. The scary thing is the devil is a Bible teacher in Matthew chapter 4.

And so you and I need to get better at understanding what is being said in the Bible so that we can both make sure that we hear it rightly for ourselves, but also understand when it is being wrongly taught, and so that we can spot that as well.

You know, the Bereans in Acts 17 are commended for being better than the Thessalonians because they tested what they heard against the Scriptures, and we want to be like that.

Now, what is step one in understanding the Bible? I think I want to suggest to you, and these guys would also agree, but step one is understanding who wrote it.

And there are two correct answers to who wrote the Bible, okay? The first correct answer is that God wrote the Bible. God wrote the Bible. 2 Timothy 3, verse 16, All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.

[5 : 14] In other words, Paul's claim is that all the Bible is spoken out by God. Theo penutas is the word there in Greece. Theo meaning God, penutas meaning breath or air.

Literally, the Bible is carried on the breath of God, giving the sense of not only is this what he has said, it is also what he is saying. Now, that claim is behind the contents of the Bible, albeit written over thousands of years in different places by different people.

One divine author stands behind it all. There is one divine intent. There is one message in the Bible. So the writer of Hebrews, for example, says that Moses, as he is writing parts of the Old Testament, is bearing witness to what will be said later.

In other words, the writer of the Hebrews thinks that Moses is not just writing for his time, he is writing for a future time. And what he says is pointing to that time as well, because there's a message that Moses heard that's running all the way through the Bible.

One divine author, one divine message. Jesus says in John chapter 8 that Abraham is looking forward to his day, because the promise that was given to Abraham, the word of God that Abraham heard that is recorded for us by Moses in Genesis, that word is about Jesus, one message which runs from the beginning to the end.

[6 : 39] Now, obviously, the implications of divine authorship of the Bible is massive, isn't it? Shantou, what do you think? Some of the implications, if the Bible is God's word, if he is one of the authors, what does that mean?

It is inerrant, yes. The Bible is without error, because God does not make mistakes. Yeah. It is true, yes, because God cannot lie.

Yeah. Yeah, we better listen. Yeah. Yeah, it's holy. Yeah. It's pure.

It's important. It has a coherence as well, doesn't it? Because the Bible doesn't contradict itself, because God does not contradict himself. There are what you might call apparent contradictions, but they're not actual contradictions, because God is not able to contradict himself.

And so it's his book, and it doesn't contradict it. But perhaps most significantly, which I think Ray has just hinted at, it means that reading the Bible is really engaging with the God of the universe.

[7 : 51] There's a great little line in the opening chapters of the book where he says, don't imagine when you open your Bible that you're like picking up a dusty old library of books. He says, imagine as you open your Bible, you're picking up the telephone to listen to God and what he's saying to you.

That's the image, isn't it? Because for us to hear from God, to listen to him, is to open his word. And so hearing and understanding it properly matters. Now, if you're walking down the street and you mishear what somebody is saying as you walk past them, it's probably very little significance, right? If you mishear your mum when she gives you instructions for dinner, that is probably more serious, because if you don't hear her, you'll go hungry. If you mishear God when he speaks a message that he has been communicating consistently for thousands of years, I would suggest that is very, very serious because of who he is.

God is the author of the Bible. The second right answer, though, is that people are the authors of the Bible. People wrote the Bible. Now, I probably don't need to prove that to you.

It's in the introduction of almost every book of the Bible, certainly the New Testament letters. You're even told at times who delivered the letters or who inscribed the letters. So the Bible's claim that God is the author is not a contradiction that at the same time it is a human book written by people.

[9 : 15] And that doesn't mean it's dictated by God as if they were sort of some passive pen holder and God is dictating the Bible to them.

There are parts of the Bible which are divine dictation. The Ten Commandments are divine dictation, aren't they? But actually, much of the Bible is not like that. The personality and character of the human authors comes through.

Their particular situations and circumstances comes through as well. And so you can hear about what their lives are like and what they're experiencing and what they're doing and what they're going through.

Now, that raises, I think, lots of questions. We don't have time to deal with all of them. But here's the point. God claims in the Bible to be able to superintend the writing of the scriptures in such a way by his spirit that people are able to write the Bible in their own style, in a way that is appropriate to the time at which they're living.

And at the same time are writing what he says eternally and unendingly. Now, like I said, we don't have time to go into all the proofs of that.

[10 : 22] But one proof of this to give you, which is, again, in Dig Deeper if you want to borrow Simms' copy, is that this is Jesus' view of the scriptures. So, for example, in Matthew 19, verses 4 to 5, Jesus says this.

Have you not read, he replied, that at the beginning the creator made them male and female and said, who's speaking? God is speaking.

Their creator is speaking. For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh. Here Jesus is saying that Genesis 2 is the word of the creator.

But when you go back to Genesis 2, verse 24, and you read that little paragraph there in verse 5, you realize that's actually Moses' explanation of what's going on. And so Jesus here is considering what is recorded as Moses' words to also be what God, the creator, is saying.

Now, I want you, with the person next to you, to think, if the Bible is written both by God and by people, how does that affect how we get to the meaning of a passage?

[11 : 32] Okay. How does that affect how we get to the meaning of a passage if the Bible is written by both God and people? Go for it while Lola runs away to go do something else. Okay.

Sorry to interrupt, but we probably need to keep moving. What are the implications of divine authorship and human authorship for how we understand the Bible?

What were you talking about? What were you talking about? Yes.

yes yes yeah so contradictions are not uh yeah are not contradictions in terms of god's intent so that there's a rule isn't there that i mustn't interpret the bible in such a way that it contradicts another part of the bible yeah the meaning of a passage cannot mean that another passage is not true yeah yes yes yes so if you if you basically have a a structure or a framework for understanding the bible which forces you to put the bible in tension against one another in such a way as uh as mike described then yeah you're you're probably going wrong yeah yeah we need to establish who is talking what's being said yeah i think there's an implication that we need to do some work right it it's not um so although it's right to say that opening a bible is like picking up the telephone to listen to what god is saying to you you might speak to him in prayer and hear from him in his word it's not actually that he's writing direct or writing directly to you he's writing through other people in other situations so you will need to understand them in their situations in order to be able to understand what then is being said to you so you will need to do some you'll need to do some work um and i wonder whether that's in some ways one of the biggest challenges because people are really lazy about reading the bible aren't they we read it as if god is just writing it directly to us and there were no other human authors involved as if you know god was just thinking about us when he wrote it yes go on trust yes great so he means that we can't edit out parts of the bible that we don't like yeah brilliant thanks charleston yeah that's really helpful yeah um so you can't read it and go well do you know what that's just that's just not something i like it was probably cultural paul probably just didn't really like women so i'm just going to delete that bit yeah we can't say that because there's a divine author behind it yeah yes yes yes yes yes say i mean that um yes you're right i'm not sure how i'm trying to work out how we relate it to what we're talking about the the the fact is that we stand in a long tradition we're not the first people to open a bible right so we we stand in a long history of um people interpreting the bible and say yeah if we're if we're coming up with novel interpretations we're probably wrong i uh had a seth and i had a conversation with someone in my office and i said

to them i uh what you need to understand is that if what you're saying is true then every christian who has looked at the bible all the people who've written all these books around you are all wrong and you're the only right person i mean i you know that could be true but it seems really really unlikely doesn't it yeah so you're absolutely right that's quite different go on
yes yeah yeah so i i think um yeah i think it's probably fair to say that the the main emphasis of the bible is summarized by the church fathers isn't it within a few centuries of the bible being written but that doesn't mean that bible study now is not going to help us you know circle even closer in on the meaning and intent and that's that's something that we need to keep doing and also because it's human authors writing in a particular time and situation we will also need to do work at then applying it to our present situation which will always change too okay let's move on because we could spend ages there and then we probably won't get very far so uh we're going to think about some different tools for understanding the bible so that's the way this dig deeper book works gives you various different tools for understanding the bible and the first tool is the only one we're going to think about this evening which is the author's purpose tool and uh satch and bynon say this about the author's purpose tool they say since the biblical writers were inspired their purpose is god's purpose that means that one of the biggest and most helpful questions we can ever ask of a passage in the bible is simply why did the author write this if we glean one or two insights along the way but miss the overall purpose of what they're saying then we haven't really understood them at all the author's purpose is king it is the tool par excellence the swiss army knife from which all the other tools fold out and which keeps them all together in some ways the whole point of having a repetition tool or a linking word tool or any other tool is to help you get hold of the author's purpose so let's think about how this works and let's try with an easy example to start off with and then we're going to do a slightly more difficult example but you're going to do that on your own and i'll get you back together at the end so let's start with two new testament passages where the intention of the author is stated really clearly the first one is in john's gospel so john 20 30 to 31 here the writer john gives you the purpose for which he's writing jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book but these are written that you may believe that jesus is the messiah the son of god and that by believing you may have life in the his name now notice john says clearly he is not writing everything about jesus nor is he writing a sort of plotted history of what happened later in his book he says that if you wrote down everything that jesus said and did you wouldn't have space for all the books that you would write instead he tells you he is carefully selecting his material to make a specific case specifically the case specifically the case based around recording what he calls signs and these signs are written so that you may believe and not just believe that the signs happened which would be one thing but believe that the signs indicate that jesus is the messiah the son of god so that by believing in him you may have life in his name now interesting isn't it that john writes those words towards the end of his book and not at the beginning of his book his assumption is you'll read his book more than once right i think his assumption is that you will read and keep reading his book and so that you will get to know it and become familiar with it and that it will keep doing this work of demonstrating to you that jesus is the messiah the son of god and that you might believe and have life in his name now that means that when i'm reading john's book i haven't really understood him properly until i have seen how what he is writing shows me that jesus is the messiah and persuades me to believe
[20 : 31] and as you read john's book in the light of john 20 you see this over and over again so john chapter 6 verse 14 after jesus has fed the 5 000 he writes this after the people saw the sign jesus performed they began to say surely this is the prophet who has come into the world they're beginning to grasp who jesus is as they see the sign that he performed jesus knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force withdrew again to a mountain by himself so they understand it but they don't quite fully understand it so he's fed the 5 000 this is a prophet this sounds like moises this sounds like something that god's messiah would do they're beginning to understand but they think that they should make him king by force and so he withdraws now that means doesn't it unless when you're reading preaching studying sharing john chapter 6 or any part of john's gospel but john chapter 6 if you're not explaining that this is to show you that jesus is the messiah you've missed the point if you think the feeding of the 5 000 is mostly about what you bring to jesus for him to make something of you haven't really understood it because that's not john's purpose in writing that's not what he wrote it for he wrote it to show you that jesus is the messiah and that you don't need to make him king by force because he will be made king by god his enthronement as it turns out will be on a roman cross another example is luke's gospel he

introduces his book by saying many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word with this in mind since i myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning i too decided to write an orderly account for you most excellent theophilus so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught now luke's purpose is very similar to john's he's writing to expose his readers to jesus but it's not exactly the same he is writing to give confidence that people might have certainty and instead of organizing his material around signs he's organizing it around eyewitness accounts and instead of organizing it around signs for a particular purpose he's he's putting it in a orderly fashion and he is doing it for his sponsor theophilus whoever that might be and he's doing it so that he might have certainty or confidence now that means that what luke writes and what john writes they write for a specific purpose that we need to understand if we're to relate properly and hear properly what they say it also means doesn't it that this thing that we often do with the gospels is that we we basically read the story in luke and we read the story in john and then we sort of blend them together and come up with some sort of general purpose is not really what they intended luke has a specific intention and john has a specific intention with the same story and i'm to understand it separately and thoroughly now it's not always that obvious sometimes you have to do some digging to find the author's purpose looking at how the material is arranged and what is being said and who is originally reading it and so let's go for an example that we're going to do together and we're going to look at 1 corinthians chapter 13 i'm going to read it to you and then in your groups i want you to think about what are the main points being made in the passage and then there's a string of cross references so you're going to need a bible and that you can look up and then think about how that makes you uh see the passage differently okay 1 corinthians 13 famous chapter read by tony blair at lady diana's funeral if you remember that some of you may not have been alive anyway paul writes this if i speak in the tongues of men or of angels but do not have love i am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal if i have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge and if i have a faith that can move mountains but do not have love i am nothing i give all to possess i sorry if i give all i possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that i may boast but do not have love i gain nothing love is patient love is kind it does not envy it does not boast it is not proud it does not dishonor others it's not self-seeking it's not easily angered it keeps no record of wrongs love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth it always protects always trusts always hopes always perseveres love never fails but where there are prophecies they will cease where there are tongues they will be stilled for whether is knowledge it will pass away for we know in part and we prophesy in part but when completeness comes what is in part disappears when i was a child i talked like a child i thought like a child i reasoned like a child when i became a man i put the ways of childhood behind me but now we see only a reflection as in a mirror then we shall see face to face now i know in part then i shall know fully even as i am fully known and now these three remain faith hope and love but the greatest of these is love okay turn in your groups and have a think about the main points what do we think is the main point of 1 corinthians 13 or the main points of 1 corinthians 13 and then we'll have a look at or then you can have a look at those verses together and see how that might change it go for it okay sorry to interrupt if you've not quite finished don't worry but our time is almost gone and so i want to get some feedback from you so as you initially read it what do you think the main point of the passages and how does that change as you look at those references let's let's jump to the second part what are those what do those references say about what life is like in corinth and what the corinthian church is like struggle yeah and strife hostile jealousy yeah division so how does that affect how you read chapter 13 yeah so chapter 13 becomes a stinging rebuke doesn't it if you're thinking about what the author's intent is in chapter 13 he is pointing out to the corinthian church this is exactly the opposite of what they're like and so the terrifying warning to the corinthian church is that actually because of what they're like it doesn't matter if they give all they possess to the poor or give their body over to hardship that they may boast because they have love they are not gaining anything in fact their worship is like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal which is a terrifying rebuke isn't it and so that that seeing the author's intent means that i don't just pull this out as some kind of neat definition of love to make me kind of get the warm and fuzzies i mean warm and fuzzies are not bad thing is it but that's not the author's intent the author's intent is that i might engage in some serious self-examination to see whether or not actually whilst i claim to be worshipping the lord i'm actually no real no real better off than a pagan worshipper

because i'm a clanging resounding gong or a clanging symbol because i am without love now obviously you have to do a bit of work don't you to find that so you know you have to read one corinthians and you have to kind of read through it and you have to see that where you get to this point is picking out the specific things that he's mentioned and before so that is a bit of hard work but actually when you read it like that it is the point is just much sharper and much more useful to us as we're hearing more clearly what god says any other feedback from your groups on that any other things that helpful things that were said or came through yes yep yep so his thing on children at the end is is a sort of description of what they're like yeah you know do do right okay yes so to take what God has given and to use it as a means of competing against one another I mean that's that's what you see in the beginning isn't it when they say that they're with Apollos or with Paul or with even with you know we're in the Jesus group like I mean these are all good people aren't they particularly the perfect Lord Jesus and then they're fighting against each other on that basis yeah yeah yeah yeah so this I mean yes walking in the flesh and walking in the spirit from the end of Galatians I think there's a yeah it's a strong warning isn't there that it is possible to go really wrong as a church yeah yeah yeah so if you it can be taken out context idea I mean it's not a bad thing to read at a wedding but it's but yeah it's it's more of a yeah it's written as a rebuke rather than as anything else yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah so he's against the misuse of gifts when it's not using love yeah so I think I mean I think in terms of like um so the Lord is very gracious isn't he we will end with this but the Lord is gracious enough that he uses his word even in our hands and even when we don't quite get it right yeah I say time in God's word is never time wasted even if you don't quite get it perfectly right because God is very gracious and very kind um and so the purpose of these sessions is not for you to beat yourselves up and go oh I didn't quite understand that rightly before and actually don't worry about that the Lord is very gracious and can use even our misunderstandings of the Bible in order to correct us and rebuke us and train us but that doesn't mean that there's an excuse for not getting better at understanding the Bible right because we want to you know part of wanting to know God is wanting to know him better and listen to him more carefully and pay even closer attention to what he said than we have done before as we move on in the Christian lives in our Christian lives so let me pray and ask God that he do that and then we'll stand and sing together heavenly father we're very slow of heart and we are very often just very lazy I mean I confess

Lord that I am lazy about reading the Bible and that at times you just open it and want quick solutions and easy nuggets to make us feel better and Lord that often just doesn't really reflect the seriousness of your word or really the the care with which you have attended the writing of the scriptures and the handing of them down to us and so Lord we pray that with even greater earnestness than we've had so far might we attend to what you say in your word that we might hear clearly your voice speaking to us and that we might respond in obedience and faith Lord we we recognize that you've been so gracious to us over the years and have used even just our cursory readings of the Bible to give us warnings and corrections and training and rebukes and say Lord what might you do if we commit ourselves to serious reading of your scriptures and to pouring over them and to spending our lives doing that Lord what that what that might bring what fruit that might bring by your spirit through your word in our lives and in our church so help us we pray and draw near to us we ask this week as we open your word in our homes on our own as we do that together as a church we pray please that by your spirit you might meet with us that we might live lives which bring you praise and glory and honor as we ask in Jesus name amen amen