

a brief explanation of your next 2 weeks...

Over the years of following Christ I've seen a ton of different approaches to studying and understanding God's word. Some worked great for me, others, not as well. The opposite is also true. What has been revelatory for others has been less captivating for me. Ah, the beauty of humanity, we're all so different. What is inescapable true of all of us is that God desires that we know Him and understand His desire for our life. I believe that what is equally true of us all, is that we have within us the ability to decipher The Bible.

In general, it seems that we approach the Bible with a preconceived notion that it's nearly impossible to understand. All too often, we think of it like a textbook over which we will be tested after we read it. When we encounter something that is a bit confusing we blow past it in hopes of finding something easier to stomach and hope that we won't have that question on the written exam. Many of us put in a gallant effort to read through the Bible, but by some time around March (about the same time we stop working out) we realize that we're not going to make it again this year. So, we default to the usual random open to wherever and read a couple verses so we can feel better about having our "quiet time". Our "quiet time" happens less frequently as the year develops and our schedules get busier. In the end it becomes frustrating and we feel guilty because we aren't doing what we believe we should be doing.

I believe that the Bible is not as difficult to understand as we make it out to be, and that if we approached it a little differently, it might actually become exactly as valuable as we believe it should be. I want to acknowledge that at times it is a bit of work and can be challenging. But, I believe it is well worth it in the end.

Speed is said to be the enemy of accuracy and vice versa. I agree. The reason they're enemies is because they have different agendas. Speed is concerned with the rate at which something moves or happens irrespective of direction. This can easily be equated with progress; however, high speed in the wrong direction is definitely not progress. Accuracy on the other hand concerns itself with the correctness or truthfulness of something and the ability to be precise and avoid errors. Both are extremely valuable, but essentially dependent on each other. A pitcher who throws a baseball 100 plus miles an hour is only valuable to a team if he can consistently put it in the strike zone. On the other hand, if there's not enough speed to make it to the catcher's mitt, there's a problem with that as well. Simply taking a few mph off of the pitch is the best way to make sure you're throwing

strikes. This is the approach I have found to be most valuable for me and I believe it will be for you as well.

“Oh the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with scoffers. But they delight in doing everything the Lord wants; day and night they think about His law. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season without fail. Their leaves never wither and in all they do they prosper.”
(Psalm 1:2-3 NLT)

Psalm 1 clearly tells us that the wise man meditates on God’s word all day (and night) long. Check out the definition of meditation.

med·i·ta·tion *n*

1. the emptying of the mind of thoughts, or concentration of the mind on just one thing, in order to aid mental or spiritual development, contemplation, or relaxation
2. the act of thinking about something deeply and carefully, or an instance of such thinking
3. an extended and serious study of a particular topic

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how to use this study

With that as a backdrop, here is what I’m requesting you join with me in doing. Rather than trying to ingest large amounts of scripture everyday and continuing to absorb new material each day, I invite you to “take a few mph off the speed” and “meditate” on a central thought for an entire week in the hopes of getting a more accurate understanding of what God is trying to teach you about himself as well as understanding how this changes your behavior on a practical level. Each week (52 in a year) I’ve written a verse for you to read. Then I’ve written some of my thoughts on that verse. At the end of each entry I have a short prayer, a scripture passage and 3-4 questions for you to “meditate” on each day for a full week. I encourage you to write down *specific* answers to the questions as well as asking these same questions to yourself all day long. At the end of the week, I am certain that you will have experienced real change in at least

one behavior in your life.

The Bible was not written so that we could master it, but that it could master our lives. This is what continues to happen for me.

proving your faith

"In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone. The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who fail to develop in this way are shortsighted or blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sin." (2 Peter 1:5-9 NLT)

"And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. (2 Peter 1:5-9 KJV)

Sometimes I have a difficult time trying to figure everything out - spiritually speaking that is. I have read books or heard individuals quote statistics that prove the truth of the Bible, or deductively reduced God to a beaker and Petri dish that can be understood through science, common sense and reason... I sometimes do this myself as well. I attempt to "prove" my "faith". I had a series of conversations (maybe more like debates) with Paul, a Buddhist friend of mine, regarding the differences in the Buddhist and Christian faiths. In order to "prove" my faith superior to his while demonstrating the errors of his beliefs, I went right to the analytical approach engaging on the cerebral level. I would assert that I did win the debate, yet it somehow failed to make the impact on him I was hoping for. There was no conversion. No moment of enlightenment. Not even any

more ongoing conversation. As a matter of fact, I have lost touch with him and have no idea what is happening in his life spiritually.

Faith. I believe.

Proof. I know.

Somehow those two words seem at odds with each other. After all, if it's proven, how does faith figure in? If it's faith, what does proof have to do with it? This of course is not a new problem. Scientists and theologians have been waging debated conversation for years trying to take the upper hand in all things spiritual. From debates on evolution/creation to time-stamping the world to the afterlife and much more... and the final answer... still no agreement, still no undisputed champion.

What interests me is that somehow, there is a uniquely tense relationship between the words faith and proof. This is what I read this morning in 2 Peter. (I need to state that here I am using the words proof and "knowledge" - *general awareness or possession of information, facts, ideas, truths, or principles* - somewhat interchangeably). I believe the problem for me is that I have inverted the approach. It must begin with faith not knowledge. After all, wasn't that exactly the problem that Jesus confronted the masses with (John 12:40-quoting from Isaiah) and even his disciples (Mark 6:52)? The Pharisees are another great example (read Matthew 12 to see the struggle Jesus had with them). They had all the knowledge in the world and had reduced it to a set of behavioral standards. Those behavioral standards became a higher value than the intention behind it. As a matter of "proof" the Pharisees demanded that they be given a sign (evidence, miracle, beaker testable act) by Jesus to prove he was from God.

This 2 Peter passage says omit comma that it all begins with faith. "Supplement your faith with..." Faith: complete trust or confidence in someone or something, strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion, based on spiritual apprehension (understanding) rather than proof. Here is where the tension sets in. Peter says, supplement your faith, add to it, increase it, and nourish it, by doing these other things NEXT. Again, start with faith and strengthen it by doing additional things. It's one thing to believe in my head that a parachute will keep me from dying; it's an entirely different thing to depend on it to save my life. All the information gathered about parachutes may provide some comfort as I jump from a plane; the true comfort comes when I pull the ripcord. It is in that moment my faith becomes real. I have just supplemented my faith.

Peter outlines the progression in this passage. Faith, virtue (moral excellence), knowledge, self-control, patience, Godliness, brotherly love and finally love for everyone. The first step, however, is faith. He asserts that applying virtue to your faith is the way to knowledge. In other words, knowledge is the direct result of experience, not the opposite. If you want to better understand God, you must first experience His way of living. Apply moral excellence/virtue. It is at that point that I can better understand God. That knowledge leads to better self-control, which leads to patience and so on. In the end, there is no magic wand to wave that gives me all the virtues I need, but as I begin to apply virtuous living, I become more Godly, and I know God more deeply.

Do I need "knowledge" to know God? Yes. How do I gain knowledge? Knowledge comes through taking a step of faith and then applying the principles of living God calls us to. That's how to "prove your faith".

"Heavenly Father, please help me live a life of faith. Give me the strength to live a morally excellent life and not try to reduce you to a list of scientific facts. May my actions 'prove' my faith in You."

THIS WEEK'S ASSIGNMENT: Read Hebrews 11, 2 Peter 1:3-9 and these questions everyday.

1. How are you living a life of faith? (Think specifically about the Hebrews 11 passage as you explain your answers to these questions.)
2. What decisions did you make today that required NO FAITH?
3. What decisions did you make today that required faith to act. List them specifically. How did you feel?
4. List at least one "faith-based" action goal for yourself

today.

forgiveness equals love.

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves." (Philippians 2:1-3 NIV)

Paul writes to the Philippians to provide encouragement to them. It seems as though he has become aware of some dissension in the ranks that is hindering their cause of proclaiming the Gospel message. Paul starts by blessing them with his usual heartfelt salutations of grace and peace, and then continues by expressing his desire that their love for each other and Christ will grow (1:9), that their focus would be on what really matters (1:10), that they would live pure lives (1:10), so that they would bring glory to God (1:11). My conversations with fellow believers usually begin with benign statements like "what's up dude?" or "how's it going?" Not Paul, he cuts right to the chase and dives into purposeful conversations. His focus is on long term God purposed things and on others first (which is clearly a recurrent Biblical teaching. **Romans 13:8, Luke 10:27, Deut. 6:5...**). Then he comes to the following thought found in chapter 2.

Andy Stanley, Pastor of Northpointe Community Church near Atlanta has described it like this. "Vision leaks". I can think of no better way to express it. John writes to churches in **Revelation 2:3-4** and says, **"You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."** This too, is a recurring theme throughout the Bible. It started with the Israelites and happened continually. The disciples fell away from Jesus after his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. The New Testament is filled with exhortations to not forsake God and/or to not turn away and follow false teachings. Vision Leaks. Somehow we get the idea that if we say something once it's done. The "I told you when I married you I loved you, and I'll let you know if something changes" approach doesn't work. Not for love. Not for anything. Vision leaks.

I love how Paul approaches the conversation starting with love and

affirmation and moving into heart matters quickly. He approaches the overarching ideas and zooms in from above. He reminds them what they've received from God first. He asks them "Have you received any of God's love? Then give it to others. How about his comfort? Fellowship? Compassion? Tenderness? If you have, (and you obviously have) use it and give those same gifts to others." The focus of the discussion is to remind the Philippians that they've received much from God and their appreciation and gratitude should be great... to the point of action.

Luke 7:36-50 paints a striking picture of this very point. In talking to a Pharisee named Simon, Jesus makes this statement. **“I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.” (Luke 7:47 NLT)** The context of this statement makes the comment even more pointed. Simon (the Pharisee) invited Jesus over to a dinner party. We're not told everyone in attendance, only a couple of the key people; Jesus, Simon and a 'notoriously sinful woman'. The text doesn't tell us what her sin is so we can only speculate (which we love to do anyway.) Nonetheless, her reputation precedes her. Simon skips the culturally appropriate thing to do when having a guest, which is to wash their feet and anoint their head with oil. Here again we can only speculate as to why, it seems likely to me there was a struggle with pride or even more likely the whole episode was a set up; a test of Jesus true prophetic status. Either way, he forgoes a customary ritual. It is at this point that the "sinful woman" humiliates herself publicly by falling at the feet of Jesus in tears. She kisses his feet repeatedly and washes them inadvertently with her tears. (Not sure why she's crying-perhaps guilt, overwhelming love, shame...) She lets down her hair (another cultural taboo) and uses it to dry his feet. She then pours expensive perfume on Jesus. This of course, causes an uproar. After all, if Jesus really was a prophet, he'd know she was a sinful woman (the rest of the town seemed to know) and would not let her touch him and defile His purity. Jesus forgives the woman's sins and makes this outrageous statement **(7:47)** which only serves to further enrage the "righteous, pure, holy, sinless..." (sarcasm intended) Pharisee. Why was it so outrageous?

The outrageousness of this statement has to do with perception. Somehow my mind (and I would guess yours too) makes allowances for the sins that plague me. The stuff I struggle with is somehow less "sinful" than someone else's. My sin (in my mind) has understandable extenuating circumstances in many cases. For you (in my mind) it is black and white. Now, I'm not condoning that line of thought or saying it's right, only that it's natural. This seems to be the mindset that I believe Jesus is addressing in this

encounter. The woman is broken and ashamed or guilty or unworthy or whatever... but she's very aware of her sinfulness. Her actions demonstrate her awareness as well as the gratefulness for receiving forgiveness. Jesus forgives her and she literally falls all over the feet of Jesus doing what should have been done in the first place by Simon the Pharisee. That part seems obvious to me. What I think Jesus is actually saying is that Simon doesn't really feel all that forgiven. His sins are much smaller than the "notorious sinner woman". He doesn't need much forgiveness from God. He's pretty good on his own. His sins have understandable extenuating circumstances. Therefore his actions also demonstrate his heart. He doesn't need to wash Jesus feet. He's too good for that. He is a cut above most and therefore acts that way. He doesn't want to defile his own purity by touching the unclean. Little forgiveness (perceived) and little love (actual).

And now back to Paul's admonition to the Philippians. **"Have you received any of God's love? Then give it to others. How about his comfort? fellowship? compassion? tenderness? If you have, (and you obviously have) use it and give those same gifts to others."** (my paraphrase) We have all been forgiven much, but how we receive and perceive it will determine how we act. Vision leaks and as we remember God's great gift of forgiveness, it is much easier to respond to our world in love.

Are you a notorious sinner or a self-righteous Pharisee?

"Jesus, thank you for your gracious gift of forgiveness. I understand my need for a Savior. Help me understand the greatness of Your forgiveness that I have received and help me give to others the very gifts you have given to me."

THIS WEEK'S ASSIGNMENT: Read Philippians 2, Luke 7:36-50 and these questions everyday.

1. In what areas of your life have you received the forgiveness of Jesus. How has this affected your life and actions?
2. Specifically, what else have you been the recipient of?

(comfort, fellowship, compassion, tenderness...) What are you doing with it?

3. Identify ONE thing you plan to do today to give to someone what you have received first from God.
4. Identify ONE way you are already giving what you've received from God. Be specific.

**(The fine print) It is important to note that I am not suggesting that Jesus received forgiveness for any wrongdoing or sin in His life and was therefore able to give it to others. Jesus was instead the perfect, sinless embodiment of forgiveness itself and was able to provide complete forgiveness from sin and demonstrate tangibly how to forgive.*