

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Number:	92		Gary L.W. Johnson
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God’s Wisdom & Will: The Need for Understanding

Lords Day 49

Question 124. Which is the third petition?

Answer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"; that is, grant that we and all men may renounce our own will, (a) and without murmuring obey thy will, which is only good; (b) that every one may attend to, and perform the duties of his station and calling, (c) as willingly and faithfully as the angels do in heaven. (d)

(a) Matt.16:24 Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. Tit.2:11 For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Tit.2:12 Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; (b) Luke 22:42 Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. Eph.5:10 Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. Rom.12:2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (c) 1 Cor.7:24 Brethren, let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God. (d) Ps.103:20 Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word. Ps.103:21 Bless ye the LORD, all ye his hosts; ye ministers of his, that do his pleasure.

Paul’s call to not be conformed to the world’s way of thinking but to have transformed minds is an imperative. The British theologian Michael Reeves pointed out that the New Testament’s word for a disciple is *mathetes*, which literally means “learner” (and from which we get our word “mathematician”). It picks up that profound truth that knowledge changes us, that we become what we know. That is why the New Testament’s word for repentance (*metanoia*) is a word all about knowing (from *noein*, “to know”). How transforming that is! It means that true repentance is about a renewing of our minds, and that means no real change without real theology.¹ In this regard Psalm 119 deserves special attention. Psalm 119 is in a class by itself. There is no other Psalm like it. It is the longest Psalm, 176 verses. It is divided into twenty-two sections, each marked by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each section consists of eight verses with each verse beginning with the letter of the alphabet that is particular to that section.² One hundred seventy-five of the 176 verses refer in some way to what the Psalmist variously calls God’s *word, words, precepts, statutes, law, promise, testimonies, and ordinances*. These all refer to God’s *ways, name, righteousness, and faithfulness*. This untiring emphasis has led some to accuse the Psalmist of worshiping the Word rather than the Lord; but as Derek Kidner has aptly stated, "Every reference here to Scripture, without exception, relates it explicitly to its Author."³ Indeed, what this Psalm shows us is the perfection of the perfect heart in its unwavering openness to all that God teaches in the Scriptures, and, as J.I. Packer comments, "The Gospels show that our Master was mastered completely by what came to him from his Bible. So, in our measure, must we seek to be, for that is the way we are called to go. Jesus' disciples must be Scripture's pupils."⁴ Scripture can only rule in one's life

insofar as it is *understood*, and it is only understood insofar as it is properly interpreted. A misinterpreted Bible is a misunderstood Bible, which, as Packer notes, "will lead us out of God's way rather than in it."⁵ The Reformers spoke of the *clarity of Scripture* (PERSPICUITAS SCRIPTURAE-- perspicuity refers to clarity of thought. This is called one of the traditional attributes of Scripture.) By this the Reformers meant that the essential content of the Bible is clear enough to be understood easily. Biblical Christianity, therefore, is not an esoteric religion. The Bible is not a book that requires some sort of mystic insight or special intellectual powers or pneumatic gift in order to understand its basic message. "The Bible," writes R.C. Sproul, "speaks of God in meaningful patterns of speech. Some of those patterns may be more difficult than others, but they are not meant to be nonsense statements that only a guru can fathom." There are, however, *two* senses in which the word *understand* can be used in reference to the Scriptures: (1) We can *know* something of the meaning of the texts of Scripture without (2) having an understanding of the message. Note the words of John Owen: "There is an especial work of the Spirit of God on the minds of men, communicating spiritual wisdom, light, and understanding unto them, necessary unto their discerning and apprehending aright the mind of God in His word, and the understanding of the mysteries of heavenly truth contained therein. And I shall add hereunto, that among all the false and foolish imaginations that ever the Christian religion was attacked or disturbed withal, there never was any, there is none more pernicious than this, that the mysteries of the gospel are so exposed unto the common reason and understanding of men as that they may know them and comprehend them in a *useful manner*, and *according to their duty*, without the effectual aid and assistance of the Spirit of God."⁶ The Psalmist prays for this assistance in order to understand. Why did he want understanding? In order that he might know and do the will of God. How often the question is asked, "How can I know the will of God for my life?" This was the Psalmist's concern. "The only fear of his heart," remarks G. Campbell Morgan, "is that he may not understand the revelation. This fear drives him to prayer that he may understand."⁷

I. WHAT IS MEANT BY "UNDERSTANDING"?

The Hebrew word HEBHIN (in the hiphil stem) means "to give understanding, to cause to understand, to teach." The word, common in Psalm 119, is found in verses 34, 73, 125, 130, 144, 169. The word stresses the ability to understand. It is the power of judgment and perceptive insight and is demonstrated in the use of knowledge.⁸ "This *understanding*," writes Bridges, "differs from mere intellectual discernment or speculative knowledge. It is the spring of spiritual activity in our walk with God (See Col.i. 9, 10); so that our obedience is not outward and reluctant, but filial delight and wholeness of heart: -- we desire not only to *keep the law of God to the end*, but every day *to the end* -- 'with our whole heart.'"⁹

A. The Nature of Understanding.

"The understanding," writes Spurgeon, "is the pilot and guide of the whole man; that faculty which sits at the stern of the soul: but as the most expert guide may mistake in the dark, so may the understanding, when it wants the light of knowledge. 'Without knowledge the mind cannot be good' (Proverbs 19:2); nor the life good; nor the external condition safe (Ephesians 4:18). 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge' (Hosea 4:6)."¹⁰

B. The Need for Understanding.

The desire of the Psalmist is not merely abstract and theoretical. It is a kind of understanding that relates to the work and will of the living God. This understanding corresponds to Paul's statement in II Timothy 3:16. It is a matter of receiving that *teaching* and also the *reproof* and *correction* that leads to *training in righteousness*. It means knowing as in God's presence (*Coram Deo*) what God's truth requires of us in our daily lives. Apart from this *all* of our activities and efforts are futile. We also need to carefully pay attention to such texts like Hebrews 5:11-14 and I Corinthians 3:1-2. It could be that the reason we lack understanding stems from a lack of appetite. The Evangelical church today (including groups that specifically call themselves "Charismatics")¹¹ is full of spiritual infants (who are tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine - Ephesians 4:14) who not

only cannot digest the meat of the Word, but have no desire for the milk of the Word either! Erroll Hulse, a former Pentecostal minister who came to embrace the Reformed faith says the greatest need in the church today centers around the ministry of the Word. "Exposition, counsel, advice and exhortation from the Word are to this end, that faith may be nurtured, strengthened, built up and made victorious. Experience is vital and important. We neglect it at our peril but it comes after faith. If experience usurps the central place which we give the Word of God, then experience will become a substitute for study and preaching. That is exactly what we are seeing with some ministers. They have succumbed to the miserable deception that experience will do the work. Sensations will draw the people and charismatic excitement will keep them happy. We hear complaints from believers that they are no longer fed with expository preaching. Gone is the labour, care and discipline essential for the feeding of the flock. Gone is a comprehensive command of the grand doctrines of the Bible which engender the obedience of faith and build up strong, resilient, mature Christians. Instead of a hearty meal for hungry souls we have pop-corn and fizzy drinks, peanuts and marshmallows, coloured balloons, vain repetitions, and a general overall emphasis on entertainment."¹²

II. HOW DOES GOD GIVE UNDERSTANDING?

The Psalmist acknowledges, says Calvin, that this understanding is "the special gift of God, which none can procure by his own power or policy; for were each adequate to be his own teacher in this matter, then this petition would be superfluous."¹³

A. Through the Holy Spirit.

Note Paul's prayers in Ephesians 1:17-18; 3:16-19; and Colossians 1:9. The Spirit of God *leads* us into truth as it HAS BEEN REVEALED IN SCRIPTURE. The Holy Spirit has never promised to direct God's people *apart* from Scripture. *All* spiritual and supernatural truth is revealed in Scripture. "The Holy Spirit," declared Luther, "does not come without the Word."¹⁴ Any supposed revelation apart from the written Word, said Luther, is a "satanic suggestion."

Never suppose that the Holy Spirit will give you understanding without diligence on your part as a student of Scripture (II Timothy 2:15). We need to study to know what the text *means*, but it is only through the Spirit's illumination that we shall be able to see how the teaching applies directly to our own situation.

B. Through the Christian Community.

By this I refer to the fellowship of faith, both past and present. This is part of Paul's emphasis in Colossians 3:16 to "teach and admonish one another." Yes, we need our personal and private Bible study, but we also need the input of the fellowship of the saints. Otherwise we can fall prey to an isolation mentality that produces, in a very real sense, narrow-mindedness. This is especially the case when we neglect the past. (What C. S. Lewis called "chronological snobbery"--therefore, he exhorted that after reading one new book, read two old ones. By this he meant two classics.¹⁵) The Spirit of God has been active down through the history of the church and we only impoverish ourselves if we neglect this and read only things that are hot off the press (or only from our own tradition or heritage, be it Baptist, Presbyterian, or even distinctively Protestant.¹⁶)

CONCLUSION: We stand in need of, not only teaching, but the power to learn. Here is where we must always begin, for we will not seek understanding until we know our need of it; and we will not even realize this until God gives us a measure of understanding to perceive it. And *what* do we need to understand in particular? Is it merely that we might lead content and happy lives? Above all things we need to know our God. "We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true" (I John 5:20). God has "made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (II Corinthians 4:6). "If we understand not," said Thomas Manton, "how can we believe? If we believe not, how can we love? If we

love not, how can we do? Knowledge, persuasion, affection, practice, these follow one another."¹⁷ Lord, give us understanding.

ENDNOTES

¹ <http://www.theologynetwork.org/theology-of-everything/fear-and-loathing-in-law-vaguenes...>

² This is called an acrostic psalm. Other Psalms that follow this pattern are: Psalm 9-10, 25, 34, 111, 112, 145. Proverbs 31:10-31 is acrostic and so are the first four chapters of Lamentations.

³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms: A Commentary: 73-150* (Intervarsity Press, 1975), p. 419.

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Beyond the Battle for the Bible* (Cornerstone Books, 1980), p.15.

⁵ Op. cit., p. 19.

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Intervarsity Press, 1977), p.17. This is an excellent little book that I highly recommend for helping people in their personal Bible Study.

⁷ John Owen, *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God As Revealed in His Word, with Assurance Therein: and a Declaration of the Perspicuity of the Scriptures with the External Means of the Interpretation of Them. Works IV* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), pp.124-125.

⁸ G. Campbell-Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Revell, 1917), p. 229.

⁹ *Theological Workbook of the Old Testament I*, eds. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, B.K. Waltke (Moody, 1980), p. 103.

¹⁰ Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Psalm 19* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 82.

¹¹ C.H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David VI* (rpt. Baker, 1978), p.102.

¹² Kenneth A. Myers, in his excellent work *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture* (Crossway, 1987) makes this penetrating observation: "At the time rock was asserting the new dominance of an instinct-driven popular culture in American society, conservative Protestants were trying to assess two phenomena within their ranks: the Jesus People and the charismatic movement. The Jesus People were essentially Christian hippies, an unorganized assortment of relatively new believers who were adamant in their eagerness to construct their fellowship and worship according to the sensibility of the counterculture. They were "contextualizing" the gospel in the setting of Consciousness III.

Today the charismatic movement is almost "unproblematic" in evangelical circles, but it was a hotly debated issue during the late 1960's and into the 1970's. It is at least a curious thing that this was exactly the time that Charles A. Reich was calling for Consciousness III and Theodore Roszak was extolling "the non-intellective capacities of personality – those capacities that take fire from visionary splendor and the experience of human communion" as "the arbiters of the true, the good, and the beautiful." The charismatic claim was that non-intellective bodily and emotional forms of communication from God were a central aspect of true piety. One must ask to what extent the controversy over this claim was settled by the power of exegetical proof from the Scriptures, and to what extent the controversy simply died down because the new cultural sensibility of instinctiveness made it difficult to sustain *any* argument concerning ecstatic utterance. One must also ask to what extent the *popularity* of the charismatic claim is due to the work of the *Heilliger Geist* (Holy Spirit) and how much was simply the effect of the *Zeigeist*. (The Spirit of the Age)" (p.154).

¹³ Erroll Hulse, *The Believer's Experience: Maintaining the Scriptural Balance Between Experience and Truth* (Zondervan, 1980), p. 134.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms IV*, trans. J. Anderson (rpt. Eerdmans, 1963), p. 425.

¹⁵ *What Luther Says: An Anthology III*, compiled by E.M. Plass (Concordia, 1959), p. 1463.

¹⁶ By classics Lewis meant Christian books that have stood the test of time like: Augustine's *Confessions* and *The City of God*; Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*; Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* (he calls this his best and most important work); Calvin's *Institutes*; Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Holy War*; John Owen's *Works* (in 16 volumes – these deal with the whole range of doctrine and Christian life); Jonathan Edwards' *Works*, especially *A Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, *The Distinguishing Marks of a work of the Spirit of God*, and *Charity and Its Fruits*. Others could be added to this list from more recent times: Christians like Hodge, Warfield, Machen, Lloyd-Jones, and contemporaries like Packer, Sproul, and Elliot.

¹⁷ I have in mind Catholic writers like Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) and such Pre-reformation figures like Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and Thomas a Kempis (1379-1471).