

3 Tips for When the Bible Seems Impossible to Understand

I am an analytical person, often to a fault. I've been known to bite my nails down to the quick when wrestling with Bible questions.

Anyone who seriously cares about the Word knows that there are tensions and paradoxes in Scripture. Even the most good-willed Christian communities have split over issues that sometimes just constitute two sides of the same coin. And God has blessed His church with the ability to build denominational camps for this issue or that issue, while all the while maintaining unity on the big stuff: preaching man's sin, God's sovereignty, the exclusivity of Christ and so forth.

Unfortunately, my brain doesn't have the luxury of splitting into two camps when I'm torn on an issue.

What do you do when it feels impossible to make sense of a biblical truth—much less, to live it out?

A wise friend of mine taught me a few lessons in how to deal with theological head-scratchers.

1. Put the Tough Verses in the Mouth of Your Go-to Guy

Pick out a verse in the Bible that you've always had a hard time squeezing into your belief system.

Now, think of the person you usually go to first for Bible teaching, the person or teaching ministry you get most of your positions from or trust the most.

Is it possible for you to imagine that preacher boldly preaching that verse, reading it fully in-context, and then

sitting down without qualifying it much at all?

If you can't comfortably imagine any Christian leader mouthing the words of a challenging passage, chances are you value their ideas or systems above the Word itself.

We need to let Scripture interpret itself, and yes, that's how theological systems are built and refined. But no system should ever rise above a straightforward reading of the text.

It's easy to rely on your favorite go-to pastors, theologians, teachers, or blogs to do the thinking for you. But Scripture is your ultimate teacher. As Charles Spurgeon once said, "Visit many good books, but live in the Bible."

2. Live in the Tension

Tension is inevitable. So while you're sitting down with your Bible open, if your goal is to eliminate any mental discomforts, you might just be out of luck.

Consider just one example: Scripture's teachings that "by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9) and yet "faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17).

Are the two verses contradictory? No; the clear implication is that the type of faith that God gives—faith that can truly save you—is the kind of faith that will produce works. So if you claim to have "faith" but aren't acting on it at all, you may not be saved. (It's also worth noting that the context of James 2 isn't a deep theological discussion of salvation, unlike Ephesians 2.)

But even understanding how to reconcile these verses, there's still tension. You can't spend so much time reading one verse that you forget the bigger picture granted by the other, and vice versa.

That tension you feel is good. It's meant to be there. Bury the tension and you lose the motivation to actively apply either verse at all (especially considering Ephesians 2:10 says we're saved *in order to* do good works!).

Compatibility is key. Because Scripture is inspired by God and error-free, we know that underlying any two sprouts of seeming contradiction is a root unifying them on a deeper level.

But don't pluck up the sprouts of paradox just to get to the root. Live in the tension. Love the tension. *Preach* the tension to yourself and others.

Remember: God is God, and His sense of reasoning is a bit more developed than ours (see Isaiah 55:9). *Fearing* God, not analyzing Him, is the beginning of understanding and knowledge (Proverbs 1:7).

Scripture actually teaches that we cannot know *anything* about the inner workings of God's mind unless He physically puts His Spirit inside of us and gives you the ability to understand (see 1 Corinthians 2).

Let the tension drive you to worship and obedience. Make Paul's yearning cry yours: "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!" (Romans 11:33)

3. Live Exegetically

Those first two lessons I learned from my friend, but credit for the phrase "live exegetically" goes to Francis Chan in his book coauthored with Preston Sprinkle, *Forgotten God*.

The idea is simple: we talk a lot about reading and preaching Scripture *exegetically*—that is, drawing out *from* the text rather than reading our ideas *in to* the text. (The opposite is called *eisegesis*.)

Chan makes the point that we need to *live the same way*:

straight out of the book.

I myself, to my shame, can spend hours or days wrestling through petty theological conundrums only to forget to obey the God they concern.

If you've ever listened to Chan preach, you've heard him pose a question something like this: If you were alone on a desert island for 20 years and all you had was a Bible to read, then you visited an American church, would you see what you'd expect?

Or, try this: If someone else was reading nothing but the Bible, then they saw how you lived, would you fit nicely along with the ongoing narrative of Christ-followers from Acts onward, or would you stand out like a sore thumb?

The way you view Scripture will determine how you live. If you think it's meant to be endlessly philosophized but never applied, don't expect life change. If you think it's a vague, metaphorical book with moral lessons and myths mixed in, expect to be disappointed. But if you really know it to be the God-breathed testimony of Spirit-inspired writers through the ages, expect—no, pursue—that spiritual breath of fresh air in your own life.

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