

The Vital Value of Understanding the Word of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the necessity of understanding the Word of God to achieve a deeper and more satisfying Christian life.

Scripture: Acts 8:30

Topics: "Understanding Scripture", "Role of the Holy Spirit"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the vital importance of understanding the Word of God, arguing that many Christians stop short of a deeper comprehension that leads to true satisfaction in their faith. He highlights the Ethiopian eunuch's journey as a representation of the need for spiritual guidance and the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the Scriptures. Sparks asserts that understanding the Bible is not merely about gaining comfort or guidance for daily life, but about grasping the greater purpose of God's eternal design centered in Christ. He calls for believers to seek a deeper relationship with the Scriptures, which can only be achieved through the Holy Spirit's work in their hearts. Ultimately, the sermon challenges Christians to move beyond superficial engagement with the Bible to a transformative understanding that leads to joy and fulfillment in their spiritual lives.

Transcript

Reading: Acts 8:1b,4,5,26-39.

"Understandest thou what thou readest?"

We have called these meditations 'Fundamental Questions of the Christian Life', which means that we are seeking to get to the real foundation and nature of the Christian life, to understand what the Christian life really is meant to be. Whatever may be the argument (and I am quite conscious that much argument might arise out of what will be said here, for very much argument has already circled around this question), it will always return to one matter, and it should be that one matter that governs and influences the argument. The one matter is: the question of absolute satisfaction with the Christian life.

If you are perfectly satisfied with your Christian life, if you are satisfied that Christianity as it is in this world today is an absolutely satisfactory thing, then there is no point in a book such as this. But if we are not wholly satisfied with our Christian life - that is, if we realise the need for something more, something fuller;

if we feel that, speaking quite generally, Christianity as we know it in the world is not quite what it should be; if we deplore all these disruptive elements, all these divisions, all this atmosphere of suspicion and criticism, and so on - if we feel like that at all, then we are surely under the necessity of trying to find out the better way, the remedy. It is incumbent upon us to seek to discover the cause of the much disappointment which exists in the hearts of so many Christians, disappointment with Christianity as we know it.

Do we, in the first place, find some explanation in the matter of our first consideration: an adequate apprehension of Christ? May not an inadequate apprehension of Christ lie at the root of much disappointment and many conditions which we deplore?

Do we, moreover, find some explanation in our second consideration: Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed? May it not be that some misunderstanding, some confusion, some uncertainty about this matter of the indwelling Holy Spirit, with all that that ought to mean, lies at the root of many of our troubles?

And now, thirdly, may it not be that the state of spiritual weakness, defeat, ineffectiveness, unfruitfulness, and many more positive elements which are quite unsatisfactory, can be traced to this: not really understanding the Word of God? We must now investigate this question. Let me say that we are not setting out to prove the inspiration of the Scriptures. That is assumed.

What we are concerned with is to emphasize and explain the necessity for understanding the Scriptures. We underline the word understanding.

Stopping Short With the Bible

For a large majority of Christians, the Bible is a book of passages to comfort them in time of trouble, to encourage them in days of depression, to give them promises for the future when the present is difficult, or to help them to decide their course in a time of perplexity. In a word, the Bible is for many a matter of the personal day-by-day life in seeking to do God's will. We open our Bibles perhaps in the morning, to get something to help us for the day - a promise, a bit of comfort, a bit of light, just something to help us through; and we do that every day. Perhaps we do it a little more diligently when things are a little more stressful: when things are not like that, perhaps we are not so diligent about the Word! Forgive me if that is a misjudgment, but I think that for many Christians the Bible resolves itself into that and not much more.

Now do not misunderstand me: I am not saying that that is wrong - that the Bible is not for that. It is for that! That is right and good, as we all know. But in this matter, as in many other matters, we stop short.

In the matter of salvation, for instance - our own as well as other people's - we so often stop short, as though that were an end in itself. Get people converted, get them to make a decision for Christ, get them to come to the Lord - put it how you will - and that is that. It is all done. Get on with others. Salvation is an end in itself. And yet, that is only the first step on a mighty highway of ever greater fulnesses.

In the same way we stop short with our Bibles. In these quite valuable, profitable and necessary things which I have mentioned, we fail to recognise that the Bible is not ultimately for that. If the Bible gives us comfort, gives us light, gives us guidance, gives us hope, gives us some uplift, on occasions, in the thought of God that is all related to something infinitely more. It is related by God to a vast, eternal purpose. You are to get your guidance, your help, your comfort, your light, your promise, whatever it may

be, not just for the day or the hour or the moment, in order to get you over the stile that is immediately before you. It is intended by God to get you on the way of a great purpose which has been formed by Him in Divine counsels before this world was. The Word of God is a vastly greater thing than a set of encouraging sayings, comforting words: there is a purpose behind the whole, and every part, in the intention of God, relates to something more than itself. That we must recognise before the Bible can really become alive.

Eternal Design and Central Person

All that is in this book is of one piece. It is linked up with one great eternal design, which relates, not to so many individual Christians as such, but to a whole, Body, chosen by God in Christ before the corporate foundation of the world. It is only as we come into line with this that the Bible will really fulfil its purpose in our lives. Otherwise - well, we may go through a day helped by something that we read, a promise or a word of comfort; it may help us very blessedly over today - but is that all? Surely there is more to it than that!

Individuals will only become enlarged unto all the fulness of God's purpose as they come into relationship with one another in that purpose: and the Bible is for that.

Yes: every promise, every bit of comfort, every bit of exhortation or light, is an integral part of a great design - and that design is centred in one Person - God's Son. If any part of the Scriptures fails to lead us into some greater knowledge of the Lord Jesus, it has failed of the very purpose for which it is there! You see, we are in keeping with our passage: "Understandest thou what thou readest?" Where does the answer lead you? It leads you to Christ. The understanding of the Scriptures is a matter of bringing us to understand Christ. The answer is found in a Person.

Now, we must recognise that, in this matter of knowing the Word of God, knowing the Scriptures and understanding what we read, there is a factor which is 'extra' and 'other'. That comes out very clearly in the instance before us. This incident in which we have our question is 'bigger than itself'. In itself it provides us with all the factors that we need for our consideration. But it is representative of a far bigger situation than itself - a situation which has a very large place in the Word of God and in Christian experience. "Understandest thou what thou readest?" This is a very pertinent and proper question. It really implies no lesser questions than these: 'Does the Bible live to you? Is the Word of God a mighty dynamic in your life? Is it the voice of God to you? Is God all the time speaking by this to you?'

Let us look at this incident, which will itself lead us out into the larger consideration. Firstly, we will look at the man who, I think we can say, is the occasion of what is here - the Ethiopian. Then we will look at that which met his need, and then at the implications of bringing these two together.

A Man in Need

Firstly, then, the man - the Ethiopian - and his need. Let us get his full-length portrait, as far as we can. Firstly, he is a man of high position and achievement in this world. He is a man who is successful, who has attained to a place of great honour. He is a man, evidently, of no mean learning. He has been up to Jerusalem to worship, probably at one of the feasts, which implies that he understood the language used there by the Jews - Hebrew or Aramaic; and then he was also versed in Greek, because the passage which is quoted here from Isaiah is quoted from the Septuagint - the Greek translation of the Old Testament. For an Ethiopian that indicates a wide range of intelligence and a considerable degree of

learning and knowledge.

Then, he was evidently a devoutly religious man, doubtless a Jewish proselyte, for we are told that he had made the long journey to Jerusalem in order to worship. But because he was a eunuch, labouring under a veto in the Old Testament, he was strictly forbidden to enter within a certain area of the Temple. I mention that, because it might well have put him off. As a proselyte of the gate, beyond a certain point he would meet a closed door. That might have discouraged him and kept him away: but such is his devotion that he undertakes the long journey to Jerusalem, in spite of the handicap and the seeming rebuff he would meet at the Temple. He goes up to worship.

Then, having taken his long journey, in his honesty and devout sincerity, he returns, clearly a disappointed man. He has been to the very headquarters of the learning and teaching of the Scriptures, to the very centre of Bible interpretation. He is returning, still in quest of something to satisfy his heart, without the real joy of having discovered. That is made perfectly clear, is it not, by the issue of this incident? There is something still eluding him, beyond his grasp, beyond his understanding.

But that is not all about him. Clearly he was a truly humble man; he was not frustrated by his own self-sufficiency - for there is nothing more frustrating to spiritual understanding than self-sufficiency. The man or the woman who 'knows it all' is a frustrated person; they are not going to get through. But here is a truly humble man, conscious of his need, and ready to confess it, knowing his ignorance and having no compunction or hesitation in letting it be known that he is ignorant in this matter. "How can I, except some one shall guide me?"

Moreover, he is a man with a Bible which is a closed book. He has a Bible, though it be the Old Testament only - it might only be the Prophets - but it is still the Bible. He had his Bible open before him, and was reading it, but it was nevertheless a closed book.

Finally, he is a man prepared to obey, ready without any hesitation to follow the light when it comes. That is, I think, the measure of the man, the life-size portrait.

Many of these things might be thought to be great advantages, providing a sure, positive ground of knowing and understanding - and yet he was still in the dark! Some of those things, of course, are essential to coming to the light, but not all of them. You can do without high position, great attainments, the achieving of ambitions; you can do without great education and natural intelligence, and still get the light. On the other hand, unless you have some of them, you will not get the light. A really humble spirit, that is teachable, open to learn, and a preparedness to obey when it comes, are essential. Nevertheless, all put together, they do not constitute a guarantee of understanding. There is an 'extra', and an 'other', factor, without which all those things still leave you, Bible in hand, in the dark.

The Meeting of the Need

I said that this incident was 'bigger than itself'. It is something which contains the essence, but it is something which represents a very much larger situation than itself. This is here in the Word of God because it touches a large and persistent situation in Christianity. Just as the Ethiopian embodies certain principles, so also Philip, when he arrives on the scene, is not just a passing figure who comes and goes. Philip embodies some very far-reaching spiritual principles, just as the Ethiopian did. Philip is more than a person, coming on to the scene and passing off again; he is the embodiment of great spiritual truths for all time.

The Man in the Glory

Now, we must step behind the incident. You notice the setting of it. Though so vital, so important, so significant, this incident is but a part of the onward movement of the exalted Christ in relation to the Church and to the world. Until we recognise this, we are without the key as to what it is and what it represents. The exalted Christ is continuing. At the beginning of this book, Luke refers to his earlier work as being the account of "all that Jesus began both to do and to teach, until the day in which he was received up" (Acts 1:1,2). This book of the Acts as we have often said, records what He continues to do and to teach after He is received up. That is quite true. The Lord does not stop. He goes on. The march of the Lord in the earth, in the world, in relation to the Church, is still forward with mighty, dynamic force.

And behind the book, behind the doings recorded here, is the One who is doing. He has not only been lifted up on the Cross: He has been lifted up to the glory, and He is drawing all men to Himself. That is the issue all the time. The issue of every doing, every incident in this book is: Himself, Himself. He is pressing on with that. It is Christ - now in His right place, in the glory, at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens, as Lord of all - who is governing all these events. That is the setting here. It is the sovereign movement of the Spirit of Christ. Figures come and go on the scene - an Ethiopian, a Philip, and how many more - but there is one overruling Figure, the shadow of a Man in the background, governing, manoeuvring, moving by His Spirit every one and everything in this book.

A Man Under the Control of Heaven

Philip, then, comes under the Spirit's government, which means that he comes under the government of the exalted Christ. That is clear, is it not? There is an interchange of words which we will not stop to discuss. 'An angel said to Philip...' 'The Spirit said to Philip...' Whether that means two things or one does not matter very much. Angels and the Holy Spirit are in co-operation. The letter to the Hebrews tells us that angels are 'ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation' (Heb. 1:14). We see here the co-operation of heavenly intelligences in this matter. Philip is under the government and control of the Holy Spirit, of the exalted Christ.

Now note that Philip is a man with but one interest in life - a very important contributing factor to the issue, to the answer to the question, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" Here is a man under the government of Christ, under the mastery of the Holy Spirit: so much so that he has no other interest in life. We could almost resolve the whole matter into that, though it is only a part. But understanding of the Word of God in such a way that it lives, gloriously and growingly lives, becomes a dynamic force in the life, and leads on to the fulness of Christ, will only be on this principle - that you and I are not people of two interests in life. It is essential that we have only one interest.

Look at Philip's history. The Church has been born in the mighty vibrant activities of the Spirit, in the onward march of the ascended Lord. Difficulties arise in certain practical matters, and the Apostles cannot withdraw from a great movement of the Spirit to handle these matters of temporal consideration. They call upon the Church to look them out certain men for that purpose: it does so, and they choose seven - men "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3) - of whom Philip is one. Philip first comes into view as one of a group of men appointed to look after the gifts of the Christians in relation to poor saints. You call that menial, perhaps; you would hardly think that a man full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom was required for that! But such men were required, even for that. Philip's history marks him out as a man of spiritual capacity. He is not a little man - he is spiritually a big man; and yet he is prepared to accept a job that you

might think anybody could do - to give the few pence or shillings to some poor widows who were in need. Being the man that he was, spiritually so large, he put it all into that, without bad feeling, without revolt, without reservation, without question.

Then came the persecution through Saul, and the scattering. What became of the widows, I do not know, but I know what became of Philip. Philip was one of those that were scattered abroad, and he went down to Samaria, and preached the Christ (Acts 8:4,5). And we know that great things happened. Now came another test of the quality of Philip. In the midst of this onward pressing of the mighty Lord, in the onward sweep of the Spirit in this irresistible tide, Philip is suddenly spoken to. Without any explanation, promise, assurance or anything else, he is told to leave it all and go far off into the country, in a direction which was desert. Such an injunction is a good test of whether a man has two interests in life: whether his heart is divided, or single. But here is a man of only one thought, one purpose, an undivided heart. We read of no controversy whatever, but instant obedience. Notice this principle of instant obedience: it implies such a total abandonment to the Lord that you are ready to do anything and everything He says, whether you understand it or not. The Lord has got you - the Lord has got your heart; you have no argument with Him about His ways with you.

That, then, is Philip: a man just governed by the Spirit, quite evidently; not only filled with the Spirit, but taught by the Spirit. He stands out in contrast to so many: not only to the Ethiopian, and all those to whom the Ethiopian had been for light and who were unable to give it, but more than that, in contrast to the very Apostles themselves as they were before Christ, by the Spirit, opened their understanding that they might understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). Something has happened to Philip. He is a man taught of the Spirit, his eyes have been opened; and so he can bring understanding and light in the Scriptures where it is needed. In a word, this man's need in the desert was met through an instrument that was absolutely abandoned to the Holy Spirit.

The Dispensation of the Spirit

What, now, are the implications of bringing these two together? Firstly, and pre-eminently, the fact of the nature of the new dispensation - the dispensation of the Spirit. A new dispensation has been ushered in and inaugurated. The Holy Spirit is the characteristic of this dispensation, and everything, so far as God is concerned, rests upon that fact. There is to be nothing other than by the Spirit; everything is to be only by the Spirit. This is a dispensation shut up to the Holy Spirit. We shall not get anywhere in relation to the things of God until we recognise and accept that. The real significance of this incident, and of all others, is that it is a part of the peculiar movement from Heaven in this dispensation - the movement of the Holy Spirit in relation to the exalted Christ.

That is the great principle of spiritual understanding: that is the 'extra', and that is the 'other'.

It is the 'extra' to all the best of education, of achievement, of position, of everything else that we have mentioned. A man may have it all, and still be in the dark! It is 'extra' to the letter of the Word - it is of the Spirit. The Word can still be a closed book, even when you have memorized it from beginning to end (if you can do that). When you can quote and cite, freely and largely, from its pages; when you know its content, its subjects, its themes; when you know immediately where to look for any given passage or subject, it may still be a closed book. That is a fact, and that fact explains a very great deal. The 'extra' to everything, whether it be large or small, great or little, is the Holy Spirit.

And it is the 'other' - something different. By these means of education and knowledge, human ability, you may arrive at certain conclusions. You may say that on this or that matter the Bible teaches so-and-so. Yes, but a hundred others say it teaches on those very same things something different - you may take any one Christian doctrine today and get many different interpretations. That is Christian theology! Which is right? Where is final authority? Now, you see, the Holy Spirit may altogether change our conclusions and make us see that on our strongest convictions we are at fault. Once He gets an opportunity, He may upset all our 'final positions' of biblical interpretation, doctrine and theology. He is 'other'. We come to that again in a moment.

But the Holy Spirit is particularly concerned with the Word of God; He is bound and committed to the Scriptures. There is no revelation extra to the Scriptures, but there is a vast amount of undisclosed light in the Scriptures, at the disposal of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, with His concern and commitment to the Word of God, is in quest of such as the Ethiopian. That is a most important significance which arises out of this incident. The Holy Spirit took the initiative in this matter. Philip would never, never have thought of this. The Holy Spirit was in quest of people such as this man on his lonely desert journey. It was by the Spirit that the question was put to him and the interpretation given which brought the great crisis in his life "...Thou readest", "...what thou readest" - "Understandest thou what thou readest?" Yes, the Spirit was in quest of people like that, and He still is. It is because they are so few and far between - like this man in the desert, with probably miles between him and the next one - that there is such a poor state generally in the Church. If only the Spirit could find more people like this, what a different situation would obtain!

The Root Principle of the Cross

Now, I wonder if we can discern that in all this the Holy Spirit was acting and operating upon one principle. This is the fundamental significance of this incident - something that throughout is never specifically mentioned, but that emerges as we meditate upon it. When the Holy Spirit is in action, He never gets away from this one thing - namely, the Cross. He was acting all the time on the principle of the Cross. The Cross is the mighty, devastating counter to the chief root-evil in mankind - pride. The principle of the Cross is selfless concern for what is of God and what is of God alone. There was here a readiness, on the part both of the Ethiopian and of Philip, at any cost, without a second thought or consideration, to obey light. This man might well have said to himself, 'Well, when I get back, what will the Queen say - what will the men in the court say? If I tell them that I have become a baptized Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, I am in for it!' But the principle of the Cross means no place for secondary considerations. You can see it in Philip: he was an utterly crucified man. You can see it in the Ethiopian: the principle of the Cross was already there, though he knew nothing about the Cross, and it gave the Holy Spirit something to work upon.

And here we find the focus of the whole question. There will be no light of this kind, no understanding of this kind, no coming through out of shadows, darkness, half-light, into the full blaze of Divine illumination, until the Cross has effected in us death to our own intellects. If we are going to argue, to project our reasoning faculties into this thing, the Holy Spirit will stand back - He will not commit Himself. We shall go on in that circle, round and round and round, in everlasting weariness, never arriving. The Cross must come right home to our intellects. That is the full force of the first chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. There you have two things placed over against each other. On the one side, the wisdom of the world (and what wisdom it was - no mean thing) on the other side, the wisdom which is from above - "Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man" (1 Cor. 2:9); and in between, "Christ crucified" (chapter 1 verse 23).

In the same way, the Cross must deal with our hearts - our affections, our desires, our attachments - and with our interests here in this world, our consideration of how things are going to affect us, how we stand to gain or lose by any course taken. If we have any such considerations, the Holy Spirit will stand back. There will be no light for such people.

And the Cross must deal with our wills. It is so clear from this account that the man, instantly the way was pointed out to him, 'jumped at it', as we say. How Philip had arrived at baptism through Isaiah 53, I leave you to consider; but he had got there, and the Ethiopian, with his openness of heart, his readiness of spirit, his will poised to do the right thing when it became clear to him, said, 'Look - water! Why shouldn't I...?' Most people say, 'Why must I?' This man said, 'Why may I not?' There is all the difference of disposition, and the disposition has come under the power of the Cross, for all that will determine the issue.

This man came out and came through. There is something very precious about this, something to take note of, as another implication. When the Spirit caught away Philip, what did the eunuch say? 'How am I going to get on without him? I dare not go back without him!?' No, it was as though it did not matter in the least, for he now had Philip's Lord within. The same Spirit was in him as was in Philip, and, in a right way, a proper way, he was standing on his own feet, independent of all external props and nurses. This is the kind of Christian we want to find! "He went on his way rejoicing." The heart quest has been met, the light has come.

A much larger incident of the same kind is that presented to us in the twenty-fourth chapter of the Gospel by Luke. Those two on the Emmaus road were but representative of this whole class to which the Ethiopian belonged: those possessing a Bible - yes, and knowing its content - but to whom it remained a closed book until the risen Lord opened the understanding. But it is the will of the risen Lord to do that. As I said earlier, the question is quite a proper one: "Understandest thou what thou readest?" Is it an open book or a closed one? a living one or a dead one? a dynamic one or an ineffective one? a weariness or a joy? That is all gathered into this question. But remember, this is the dispensation of the Spirit. He has come committed to the Word in relation to the risen Christ; and through the Word - through Isaiah 53, and through all the rest - He will bring you to the Christ.

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