

The Bible is Understandable

1 Cor 2:6-16 and various

When I was 8 or 9 years of age my parents took me and my brother and sister to the National Art Gallery in Canberra. I don't remember a lot about that visit, except I do remember one painting: Robert Ryman's *Arena*. Here it is on the screen, can you make it out? If it's hard to see that's because Robert Ryman's *Arena* consists of a piece of canvas painted completely white, and that's it! No other colours, no shapes, no distinct objects. It's hard to see on this photo because when it's hung on a white wall it tends to blend in!

Here's another photo of a different Ryman painting in a different gallery. The contrast with the wall is a little better, but as you can see, this second painting is also a canvas painted white. Ryman pretty much only paints with white paint. The reason I remember his painting out of all the others is because I remember my brother (who is 8 years older than me) making a disparaging comment as he stood in front of it. Something like "*Humph! Is that it?!!*"

Here's a whole gallery of Ryman paintings. This scene creates a visceral reaction within me. I want to yell out "What are you doing Ryman? This is madness! How can you get away with this?" But he does get a way with it. White painting after white painting, all looking pretty much the same, all worth millions of dollars. The record price at auction for an original Ryman? US\$20 million, sold in New York in 2014.

Let's take a vote, who thinks this is overpriced rubbish? Who thinks Ryman is an artistic genius? Who thinks that there must be something important about his work, but you just can't work it out, and that you're obviously missing something? I'm that last category. Obviously people are buying his paintings, he's being hung in museums around the world, but why these paintings are important and what they're about is lost on me.

Now the reason I'm speaking about Robert Ryman is that I suspect for many of us, opening up the Bible is a bit like looking at a Robert Ryman painting. We can see other people treating the Bible with reverence, we know that it has a special place in our history and culture, but when we open its pages we're at a bit of a loss as to what to make of it. Today I want to explore what we can do to help bridge the gap. How can we start making sense of this book? How can we start to value it in the same way that others do? How can we move from confusion to appreciation? I hope we can start to see how the Bible is understandable.

Our starting place is our second reading - 1 Corinthians 2:6-16. Let's have a look. If you have that page open you'll see that the context is Paul speaking about the message he brought to Corinth as an Apostle. He says earlier on in verse 2 I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. This was Paul's

message: Salvation is found—favour with God is found—through the death of God's Son and King, Jesus.

This was the content of Paul's message, not only in Corinth, but in every city. Wherever he went he preached Christ crucified, whenever he wrote a letter he explained why Christ's death is important, that it removes our sins and reconciles us to God, how it becomes an example we follow as we live a new life as forgiven people. This was the content of his message, and so it became the content of the New Testament, it became the content of the Bible. You remember two weeks ago we asked the question, *Who wrote the Bible?* And we said that as far as the New Testament is concerned it's the Apostles who stand behind it; men like Paul, Peter and John, men writing in the power of the Holy Spirit. And so the focus of their preaching becomes the focus of our Bibles; a focus bearing down on Jesus and what he achieved at the cross.

Now in the passage that we had read out to us, Paul has two things to say about this message of his. The first is this: *on its own, this is a message that hard to understand and accept*. In verse 7 this message is described as a mystery that has been hidden. And in verse 8, Paul says that None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. The message of Jesus and the cross is a message people just don't get.

Paul experienced this himself when he faced trial in front of Governor Festus in Acts chapter 26. When Paul starts speaking about Jesus being raised from the dead, Festus interrupts him "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." Festus' reaction is a bit like my reaction to a gallery of Robert Ryman paintings: "What is this meant to be? You call this art? You're insane!" The message about Jesus can have that effect.

We've all seen this from time to time. When people come face to face with the Gospel message, sometimes they don't get it and—frustratingly for us—true understanding remains elusive. Sometimes the misunderstanding is on a very basic level. I remember one youth group member saying to me, his leader, that he felt he couldn't become a Christian until he got his behaviour together. He didn't understand that it's not about our behavior, its receiving God's forgiveness even though we're still sinners, about trusting in what God has done *for us*, not what we can do for God. A tragic misunderstanding.

Or sometimes people understand what the Bible is saying but they just can't accept it. Some people are offended by the concept of salvation coming to us a gift we receive. "I've never received any type of hand out before, so I'm not going to receive one now!" Maybe they need a clearer understanding of just what is at stake if they don't receive that handout. Or what about our Muslim friends who just can't comprehend the idea of God having a Son. "How does that work?" they ask us. The Bible's message is a hard one to understand and accept. And so if you're finding it

hard to wrap your head around it, then that should be no big surprise. We need some help.

This is the second thing Paul has to tell us in this passage: *even though understanding is difficult, there is help available*. Skip down to verse 13. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. When Paul preached his message and wrote his letters, he wasn't making his content up, rather he himself was being led by the Spirit. Paul describes the Spirit here as a teacher, and without his help we'd remain in the dark, verse 14: The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. Paul is saying that not only has the Spirit worked through the Apostles to declare the gospel, but that he also needs to get to work on the listeners. Not only did the Spirit write the text-book, he also helps the students understand it in the classroom.

One of the hobbies that I've picked up in recent years is that I've started to fish. Let me tell you, you can't just cast into the water expecting to haul in your catch. You need to know where the fish are, you need to know what they're going to bite, you need to know how to set your hook and you need to know how to handle a rod. And then once they bite you need to know how to strike, how to land. The first time a friend and I landed a decent sized fish we didn't know how to gut it so we left it in the freezer until the end of the holiday then we had to throw it out. Our lack of knowledge failed us [left us floundering]. I've found that I need teachers to help me fish. Be they teachers in a book, or on TV or one of my friends who knows more than me, otherwise I'm getting nowhere.

It's the same with our knowledge of God. We need a teacher otherwise we're in the dark. We humans can entertain lots of ideas about God, but without the right tuition it's like casting a line randomly into the ocean; it's not going to get you very far. But Paul tells us that we have access to the best teacher of all: God himself in the person of the Holy Spirit is willing to teach us, and he starts by helping us understand and accept the basic backbone of the Bible's message: the truth about who Jesus is and what he came to do. No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:2

And he's a teacher who is willing to stick around and take us deeper. There's an old saying which is attributed to Pope Gregory the Great (who lived around 600 years after Jesus) and he said that "the Bible is shallow enough for a child to wade in, but deep enough for a elephant to swim in". On one hand the Holy Spirit can teach a child the great truths of Scripture, but on the other hand there is a great depth that he wishes to help us explore. Jesus promised his disciples in John 14:26 that the Spirit will teach them *all things*; there is a depth to what the Spirit has for us.

But sometimes that depth can feel a bit elusive, especially when we turn to some of the more obscure parts of the Bible. So how is the Holy Spirit going to take us deeper? How will he teach us?

One way the Spirit can take us deeper is by using other parts of the Bible; pointing to other things he has written. Think back to Robert Ryman, our painter friend who only uses white. Imagine you're standing in that gallery with a whole bunch his white paintings. After you get over the shock of seeing a room full of white canvases, I think you'd start to learn something by seeing them all next to each other, you'd see the slight variations in each one and maybe those variations might tell you what Ryman is trying to achieve. We can take the same approach to the Bible, if there's a chapter you don't understand, then take a step back, think about what else the Spirit has written. Theologians call this the *analogy of scripture*; comparing one part of the Bible to other parts in order to gain a clearer understanding.

I want to share with you an example from my own personal Bible reading. Last week I shared with you some of the electronic methods we can use to read the Scriptures. This week I've brought my old fashioned Bible reading journal. I read a passage and then I write down my thoughts and a prayer in response. A little while back I was reading through the OT book of Jeremiah. A long book of Old Testament prophecy which can seem daunting.

Here's the passage I was reading, Jeremiah 7.1-8. On one level it's not too hard to comprehend what Jeremiah is saying. He's standing in the temple rebuking the people for being hypocrites. They come to worship, yet they treat each other terribly, and Jeremiah is saying, if this continues, "God will remove you from the land." So that's what it says, but I'm still left with some questions. God's people are in a temple while we are in a church. Should we be meeting in a temple? I see there are some pretty serious consequences for not following God properly. I know at times that I don't deal with others fairly, does that mean God will remove me from where I live? How angry does God get?

Well, to gain understanding we need to look at what else the Holy Spirit is saying. Let's start taking a few steps back. When we think about the whole of the book of Jeremiah, we see that God seems to understand that his people find it hard to obey him. Jeremiah 24:7 I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart. OK, so through Jeremiah the Holy Spirit has indicated that a time will come when God himself will give his people the ability to turn back to him, "I will give them a heart to know me" he says. So the terrible consequences of Chapter 7 are not the end of the story. Yes God wants obedience, but it seems that he himself is active in making that obedience happen.

Ok, so what if we take another step back and think about what the Holy Spirit has said in the whole Bible? When we get to the New Testament we see a number of relevant things, some passages I haven't got on the diagram. Jesus says in the

Gospels that the temple will be destroyed and raised up again in three days; a reference to his own death and resurrection. This means that he has fulfilled all that the temple used to do, he himself is the sacrifice for sins so we don't need to go to the temple anymore. We are told by Paul that now days our citizenship is in heaven, by Peter that we are aliens in this world, so we are no longer tied to a single piece of land like the Israelites were, so that aspect of the Jeremiah passage is no longer relevant.

But as I was reading this passage from Jeremiah I was reminded of something that Jesus said in Matthew 7:21. In that verse Jesus says "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." That's just like the people in Jeremiah 7:4 who say "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!" Jesus is repeating this principle that says "you can't pretend to worship God while ignoring his will". Our method of worship might be different to the Old Testament, but the principle of being genuine remains. And I think that the picture is completed with a passage like 2 Cor 5:17. If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! The ability to be genuine was promised by Jeremiah, but ultimately it was delivered by Jesus, so if we have placed our trust in him, then we can start to live in a new way, a way that is pleasing to God, which includes being genuine and not hypocritical in our worship.

Reading the Bible like this is kind of like those competitions you hear on the radio where they play you a snippet of music and you have to guess the song. I heard one the other day when the fragment was one quarter of a note. No one could get it so they gradually extended the extract so you heard more. That's how we read the Bible, we listen to the whole thing so that we understand what each snippet is doing. Sometimes on those competitions there are people who can guess the snippet straight away. You think "How can they do that?" Well, how can they do it? They've been listening to music all their life. That knowledge doesn't come overnight but it does come with consistent long-term exposure. And so it is with the Bible. Understanding the Bible comes with long-term instruction via the Holy Spirit.

How can we understand Robert Ryman's paintings? The best way is to listen to the artist himself. This is what he says about one of his paintings. "It's not a blank canvas, it's got a lot in it, this has to do with the light. It looks very different in different light. It's a painting, not a picture." So according to the artist he's not trying to represent any image, rather he's experimenting with the basic elements of painting; the canvas, the paint, the light. He's asking us to think about the materials, and he's getting us to ask the question "What is art?" His work was powerful enough to effect one 8 year old that I know! Is it an experiment worth \$20 million a pop? I'm not sure. But at least I know what he's trying to do once he explains it. And in a similar way, the Holy Spirit is willing to explain what he's left us in this book. Are we ready to listen to him?