

Chapter 2 - Developing an approach to the study of the scripture

Look for life, not just knowledge

My wife and I spent six months doing voluntary work in Ghana, West Africa. On the back of nearly every taxi and lorry was a scripture reference or a scripture quote. Some of them only had fragments such as “unless God” or “with God”. As a bit of entertainment whilst driving along the pitted and dusty roads we played a game where one of us would quote a fragment of a well known verse whilst the others in the car would try to guess the rest of the intended verse.

We so often think we know what a passage means simply because we know what it says. We know what the next word is. Quote half the verse and perhaps we can quote the rest and give the reference. But do we know what it means? We might understand the meaning of the individual words, we might even understand the grammar. Who knows, we might even be able to remember its context – the preceding and succeeding passages. But still, do we know what it means? We might know the theological significance of the passage, how it fits with the great themes of creation, salvation and glorification. Perhaps we think we really do know what it means. But do we actually experience its truth? Do we live in the light of it and the good of it? Are we enjoying the promised blessings? Do we bear the fruit of it in our lives and ministry? Only then can we truly say we know what a passage means.

Do you remember what Jesus said to the woman at the well? “God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth.” (John 4:24) What did Jesus mean by *truth*? Did he mean we must have our doctrine exactly correct? Judging by the way Christians love to argue over doctrine one would guess they take that to be his meaning!

The trouble is that we come from fallen stock and as a consequence have mistaken knowledge for truth. It all goes back to the garden of Eden. You might like to read Genesis 2:8 to the end of chapter 3 and see what we learn about the two special trees mentioned.

In Genesis 2:9 we notice that there were two trees in the middle of the garden, the *tree of life* and the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. In 2:16-17 we see that Adam and Eve were only forbidden to eat of the second tree. Then in 3:24 we see that having eaten of the forbidden tree, Adam and Eve were prevented from eating of the tree of life that had not been forbidden previously.

We can deduce from the passage the following:

1. Prior to the fall, God allowed Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of life.
2. However, Adam and Eve had not eaten from the tree of life.¹
3. Because of the fall, God now wanted to prevent Adam and Eve from eating of the tree of life.

So what do these trees represent? The tree of life is clearly to do with eternal life (3:22) – which we will look at in a moment. The *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* represents the ability to make the same judgement about an issue as God would. This is how God defines true knowledge.²

Now here is a surprising thing I notice in the account: The result of eating of the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* was not that Adam and Eve learnt to make Godly judgements, but rather that they made false judgements! Let us look at the evidence:

¹ God barred their access to the Tree of Life after the fall lest they should live forever (v22). If they had already eaten of the tree, they would already possess eternal life. The need to bar them shows that the fall and eternal life were not incompatible.

² “Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2)

1. Prior to eating they enjoyed free fellowship with God in the garden but afterwards they hid from their creator in fear.
2. Prior to eating they were not ashamed of their nakedness (this was right, not wrong) but afterwards they were ashamed.
3. Prior to eating they both knew it was wrong to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil but afterwards they had no conscience about their disobedience. They said they were hiding because of nakedness, not because they had disobeyed God.
4. Prior to eating they had a desire for good things (beauty and wisdom) but afterwards they engaged in blame shifting, trying to deceive God.³

Now what does this look like to you? Do you see a gain in the ability to make wise and Godly choices? The most disturbing thing to notice is that after eating, Adam and Eve *thought* that they had gained the knowledge of good and evil whereas in fact they had lost the ability to make Godly choices. They acted on their newfound ‘knowledge’ even though it contradicted the way God had created them (3:7).

You may be wondering what all this has to do with developing an approach to scripture, but I can assure you that this observation, which the Holy Spirit pointed out to me some years ago, has completely reshaped my approach to scripture.

This story of the fall and the two trees has profound significance to all of mankind and especially to Christians. We all tend to live, convinced that we have gained the knowledge of good and evil, on the basis of our own best judgements. Adam and Eve covered themselves and hid from God and so have all their offspring. Adam and Eve came up with excuses for their actions and so does everybody else. The tragedy is that neither they nor their descendants noticed that the knowledge gained was twisted by the act of disobedience that acquired it. Even though thousands of years of experience has shouted out that the knowledge is corrupted and often self-destructive, mankind is still completely addicted to, and taken in by, the allurements of this tree – the lust for knowledge.

But the worst thing of all is that Adam and Eve and their descendants mistook the knowledge of good and evil for life. There was another tree. What would have happened if they had eaten of the *tree of life* instead? What has happened to that tree? Can new-creation Christians eat of it?

If you look at the cross-references to Genesis 2:9 you should find Revelation 2:7 and Revelation 22:2,14,19. These tell us the wonderful news that the tree is alive and healthy and that one-day the faithful will have the right to eat of its fruit. But is that it? Are we just stuck with a corrupted knowledge of good and evil until we get to glory or, as new-creation children of God restored to fellowship with our Father, is there even now access to this tree?

Is Jesus Himself not the Tree of Life? When Jesus said “I am the vine and my Father is the gardener”, when He said “I am the bread of life... If a man eats of this bread he will live forever”, when He said “I am the way and the truth and the life⁴” was Jesus not pronouncing himself to be the very same source of eternal life that was attributed to that tree in the garden of Eden? If this is so, as it surely must be, then the story of these two trees in the Garden of Eden has even more to say to us.

All this leads me to see these two trees as representing two different kinds of knowledge, or two different ways of living. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents our fallen human wisdom; that is the whole collection of natural knowledge we possess (some true and some false) and our attempt at applying wisdom to that knowledge. On the other hand, the tree of life represents the true experienced knowledge of God; knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection⁵. When

³ Of course, these qualities are not mutually exclusive, but they indicate a change for the worse.

⁴ John 15:1, John 6:35,51, John 14:6

⁵ Philippians 3:10

we come to the Tree of Life, our natural knowledge is modified by Spiritual revelation and our human wisdom is overruled by the wisdom from above.⁶ The Tree of Life does not negate or do away with our knowledge, it restores and enlightens it so that we can say with Paul, “We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2Co 4:18)

Whenever we satisfy ourselves with the ‘right’ answer we are eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but when we hunger instead for genuine Spiritual life, for the reality of Jesus and living in the good of the promises, then we are reaching for the fruit of the tree of life.

Imagine yourself sitting with your friends in a typical housegroup discussion. The leader reads a passage of scripture and asks some questions about it. What happens? A long silence ensues. The leader waits for someone to pluck up the courage to give the right answer. Meanwhile the members of the group sit with the right answer immediately springing to mind, but not wanting to appear too quick to answer because there are younger or shyer Christians present; they should be given a chance to contribute. Eventually dotty Molly says something completely disconnected or off the wall, which stimulates a short discussion about the right answer whilst trying to reassure Molly that what she said was profound and truly helpful. Meanwhile everyone checks the theological correctness of their own unspoken answer in their minds and mentally gives themselves a pat on the back for knowing a more exact answer than anyone else.

Perhaps your bible-study discussions are light-years from this description; if so I am very glad and apologise for misrepresenting your group but nevertheless, if you have been a Christian for long, I’m sure you will be able to identify with this description from experiences in your past.

Now just imagine that there were two trees in the room with your group: the *tree of life* and the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. If you could all see these trees and reach out and pick their fruit, how then do you think your discussion might progress (supposing of course that you had all done the little study above and knew what they represented)?

Do you think we would all be so quick in our minds with our correct answers and so slow in our discussions to share the deeper realities of our troubled lives? Even if only the group leader could see those trees I predict that the discussion would be transformed.

What effect would the presence of those trees have upon our listening to sermons? Would we still be so quick to check the theology and style, the appropriateness of the illustrations, the originality of the thoughts...? I wonder what would be the effect if, as an alternative to banners showing crowns and trumpets on each side of the preacher, we had banners showing the *tree of life* on one side and the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* on the other.

Now what about the effect of these two trees on our one-to-one conversations? Perhaps as an alternative to wearing WWJD or DJSTPS⁷ wristbands we should encourage the wearing of a TKGE on one wrist and a TL band on the other. Perhaps then we would more readily heed the exhortation of Paul to Timothy to have nothing to do with foolish arguments that produce quarrels.⁸ Perhaps we

⁶ “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.” (1Co 2:10)

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” (Jas 1:5)

“But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” (Jas 3:17)

⁷ “What Would Jesus Do?” and “Don’t Just Stand There, Pray Something”

⁸ 2 Timothy 2:22ff

would be more honest and open about our spiritual health and devote ourselves more wholeheartedly to encouraging one another to love and good works.⁹

If we could see these two trees what, do you suppose, would be the effect on our private reading and study of Scripture? Would we be less inclined to tick the box “I have read my portion for today”, and more inclined to sit at the feet of Jesus¹⁰ and ask Him to teach us? Would we be less inclined to rush through our prayer list and be more inclined to let the Holy Spirit intercede through us?

Now, lest I have been misunderstood, let me assure you that I am not suggesting that the “spiritual” way is to kiss our brains goodbye and float around in a super-spiritual dream world where we all die of “felt-led” poisoning. On the contrary, it is certainly the knowledge of good and evil that we most desperately need. What I am saying is that the human race suffers from a disease of the mind with two deadly symptoms

1. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, we believe that we can discern the knowledge of good and evil through our own reasoning.
2. We elevate factual knowledge¹¹ way above truly knowing God¹².

I urge you to spend a good amount of time with the Lord thinking and praying over these matters before you proceed further with this book. Ask the Holy Spirit to etch these truths into your heart and mind so that you will never forget and never fail to see these two trees; that you might hunger for the one and be wary of the other.

Obedience to the Holy Spirit

Scripture is written to encourage our knowledge of God and obedience to the Holy Spirit. Therefore we must come to the scriptures to listen. If this is not our purpose in study, we cannot expect to get very far. Why would the Holy Spirit reveal the truths of scripture to us if all we are seeking is greater head-knowledge? What a terrible trap to fall in to – to devote more time and skill and energy to talking about God rather than talking to God. What good does it do to skilfully expound on Paul’s passion for Christ if we do not earnestly seek to emulate that passion and to emulate the Christ he is passionate about? After all, ultimately it is not we who study the scripture, but the scripture that studies us! The conclusion to the process of gaining an understanding of God’s word must be to let God’s word speak to us.

Believers need examples to inspire them and to follow, hence the appeal in Hebrews 6:12 “We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.” None of us are living at the level of devotion, holiness and faith that we would like to be. But if we approach scripture with humility and a true desire and commitment to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in our lives then we should not be afraid to say with Paul, “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice.”¹³ Can we truly claim to have understood the scriptures if we cannot conclude our study by saying this?

⁹ Hebrews 10:24

¹⁰ I apologise for using here, and elsewhere in this introduction, a piece of Christian jargon that plainly has to be translated into something rather more literal if it is to mean anything at all. But I expect that we will discuss such matters in more helpful detail later on in our study.

¹¹ John 5:39-40 You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

¹² See Matt 7:22-23, Matt 25:11-12

¹³ Phillipians 4:9

Let us be such an example.

The Holy Spirit as our tutor

When approaching the study of a passage of scripture, especially a ‘difficult’ book such as the letter to the Hebrews, you might assume that the first port of call would be a commentary.

It is true that the letter was written by an unknown author thousands of years ago to an unknown audience and consequently we may have some difficulty understanding some parts of the letter because we are not immersed in the same culture as they were. However, it is also safe to assert that the original recipients did not have theology degrees or commentaries but were nevertheless, presumably, able to understand it (admittedly they knew who they were, and who the author was, neither of which we know for certain). Furthermore the true Author was God and He has given us the Holy Spirit as our teacher. Is it not reasonable to expect that God has given us a book that can be studied and understood by the majority of believers from all tribes and nations of all levels of education? Of course scholarship and commentaries often have much to offer to help us in our study, and there are indeed parts of the OT prophets in particular that are difficult to get to grips with without the help of a good commentary. Having said this, our starting point should be trusting God that in approaching the bible what is important will become plain, given diligent, prayerful, obedient study.

Let us learn to be students with the Holy Spirit as our tutor.

What did God feel at the time?

Here is another tip for transforming your reading of scripture. As we read we often imagine ourselves in the situation we are reading about. Perhaps we imagine what the disciples felt like whilst we read the gospels, or we wonder what Paul or the Corinthians felt like during their correspondence. It is important that we do this if we are to gain a reasonable grasp of what we are intended to understand from the passage – more of this later, but what about the feelings of the Divine author? What did God feel at the time? Especially when reading through the whole bible I try to keep this question very much in my mind. This has transformed my reading of the Old and New Testaments alike. It tends to turn me to prayer as I read, asking the Lord to let me feel something of what He felt at the time, thanking him for his great patience and love and praying for the church today. I believe that this exercise has done much to form Christ in me¹⁴.

Now I think it is probably time for you to read the letter to the Hebrews again. You could try another version or go back to your usual version, but this time have a stab at noting down some of the main themes. Rather than trying to reduce it to a single encompassing theme, try to notice everything that could be classed as a theme. Remember to ask the Holy Spirit to help you and to be your teacher and to glorify Christ as you read.

¹⁴ Galatians 4:19