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Monday

How to Read the Word

“Did not our hearts burn within us . . . while he opened to us the Scriptures?”¹

BY FÉLIX H. CORTEZ

One of the things in the Bible I find most astonishing is that the disciples were completely discouraged by Jesus’ death on the cross. If you think about it, it is very startling.

During His ministry Jesus taught the disciples several times in plain and explicit language that He was going to be killed, but also that He would rise from the dead.² The cross, however, caught the disciples by surprise, and when Jesus arose they failed to believe! How could this have happened?

When I think about it, the disciples’ failure disturbs me, because I sense that it could also happen to me. The good news I have, however, is that it doesn’t have to be this way. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus explained how we should read the Bible.

PLACE YOUR FAITH IN THE BIBLE

Jesus explained that the reason His disciples failed to understand was that they failed to “believe” (Luke 24:25). Faith in the Word of God is the first step toward understanding (Heb. 11:3).

Some readers place their trust in the church or church leaders. They are happy to let them do the thinking and tell them what the Bible means. Some do it for convenience, but others think that the Bible has a kind of “spiritual” or “secret” meaning that only a select few can understand. This is the basis for allegory.

For example, Bernard of Clairvaux, a French abbot in the twelfth century, wrote a sermon on the “teeth” of the bride in Song of Solomon 4:2. He argued that the teeth represented the monks of the higher and

lower orders in a monastery. His sermon is fascinating, but it doesn’t have anything to do with the original meaning of Song of Songs 4:2.

A similar phenomenon happens today when preachers interpret Scripture in ways different from the original meaning of the passage. Allegory tells us more about the ability of the interpreters and the meaning they want to convey than about the meaning of the passage. It places our trust in human beings and exalts them.

But the Bible says that God gave His Word to everyone, and that all can understand it, even children (Matt. 11:25, 26; John 7:17; 2 Tim. 3:14-17).

Other readers place their trust in human reason. God gave us the ability to reason. He wants us to use it in our relationship with Him (e.g., Isa. 1:18). For some readers, however, reason neutralizes the power of God’s Word. When a biblical assertion does not meet human logic, they push it aside considering it an error that somehow crept into the Bible. But God is greater than our ability to understand Him. We need to trust Him anyway (Matt. 22:29-32; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-25).

Some readers trust in themselves. They take the words but forget the context and the original intent of that passage, setting themselves up unwittingly as the determinant factor of interpretation.

For example, what does 1 Peter 2:21 mean when it says that Jesus left us an “example” so that we might “follow in his steps” (NIV)? If we ignore the context, this passage could mean that we should wear the same kind of clothes Jesus wore, be single as He was, and similar things the interpreter may want it to say.

The Bible says that God gave His Word to everyone, and that all can understand it, even children.

The context of the passage is clear, however. God meant that we should not “commit sin,” “revile,” or “threaten” when we are mistreated. When we disregard the context of Scripture, we set up ourselves as the determinant factor of interpretation.

Others have given up faith altogether. Frustrated by the diversity of interpretations, some have come to believe that no one has the truth. But Scripture says that God has given us His Holy Spirit to guide us “into all truth” (John 16:13).

God desires that we place our faith in Him, not the church, its leaders, human reason, even ourselves, because we are all fallible.

READ ALL THE SCRIPTURES

Another reason that Jesus’ death on the cross caught the disciples by surprise is that they had not read “all” the Scriptures. They had focused, instead, on sections of the Bible that they liked. The disciples loved the title

Son of man, because it identified Jesus with the heavenly figure of Daniel 7:13, 14 who would receive dominion and a kingdom that would never be destroyed.

But Scripture also said that the Messiah would die for the sins of the people (Isa. 53) and be cut off (Dan. 9:26). The disciples did not “understand” these passages, or Jesus’ own warnings, because it went against what the disciples had always believed and against all their own desires. They did not have “ears to hear.”

In contrast, Jesus explained to the disciples, “beginning at Moses and *all the Prophets*, . . . [and] in *all the Scriptures* the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:26). We need to do the same. To read “all the Scriptures” means asking God to give us “ears to hear” all the Scriptures, even those passages we would prefer not to be true or that we don’t like.

PRACTICE WHAT IS LEARNED

Obedience is the last step in understanding Scripture. Jesus said that those who are willing to do God’s will will know the truth (John 7:17). The same happened with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. When they urged Jesus to stay at their home, suggesting that they had accepted His message and wanted more, “their eyes were opened” and they recognized Him (Luke 24:31).

The opposite is also true. Those who do not “love . . . the truth” will be deceived at the end of time (2 Thess. 2:9-12; cf. 2 Tim. 4:3, 4).

Understanding is not a place at which one arrives, but a journey on which one embarks. Intimacy with God is the result of a life of risks taken to follow His counsel, and

the certainty it produces that His Word is true and His promises are sure. Once disciples have experienced this, they will not want to remain silent. Just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. ©

Suggestions for Prayer

1. Pray that the Lord will give us “ears to hear” and the will to apply what we learn in Scripture.
2. Pray that, as a community of faith, we will place our faith explicitly in God’s Word.
3. As Adventists, we feel a special mission to help others learn about the three angels’ messages. Pray that we may apply the principle of considering “all the Scriptures” to our understanding and teaching of God’s Word.

¹ Luke 24:32, ESV. From The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² First prediction: Mark 8:31 and parallels. Second prediction: Mark 9:31 and parallels. The third was in the last trip to Jerusalem: Mark 10:32-34 and parallels. See also John 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:4, 21, 32; 17:1.

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