

Chapter 2 — The Holy Scriptures

Q19. Are the Holy Scriptures plain or obscure?

A. The Bible is plain in the things necessary to salvation. “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Ps. 119:105).

What does it mean that the Scriptures are “plain or obscure”? Plain means clear. Obscure is another word for hidden or difficult to understand. Let’s say that you have two rooms. The one has much light and the other only little light. On the table lies an old map. This old map helps you to find your way. In which room is it easier to find your route? Of course, in the room with much light. That one is not obscure or dark. But why is the question asked in our catechism? We can find many difficult things in the Bible. No, this time it is not about the original languages but what we have in English. But the answer says “plain.” No, it does not say that the Bible is plain in all things. Why? As said, there are difficult things in Scripture. What are some of those difficulties? First, certain doctrines. For example election and reprobation, God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, and baptism. Second, seeming contradictions. For example, did Jacob travel to Egypt with 70 or 75 people? Are we saved by faith alone, as Paul puts it, or also by works, as James writes? Third, difficult words. Then we can think of the difficulty to translate some words. “Behemoth” is such an example (Job 40:5). It is an animal, but what kind of animal is it exactly? Another difficulty can be the pronunciation of certain words. Think about the name YHWH. Do we have to say Jehovah or Yahweh? We are not fully sure. On the other hand, we have things in the Bible that are clear to us. What are some of those things? First, histories. Think of Israel out of Egypt, the fight between David and Goliath, and the death of Jesus on the cross. Second, the basics of salvation. It is easy to understand that we have a wrong heart, that we need payment by Jesus Christ, and that we need to ask for forgiveness. Psalm 119 makes clear that parts of Scripture are plain, “Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light on my path” (Ps. 119:105). No, the Bible is not a spotlight. But you can compare it with a small oil lamp. It is just enough to take the next step on the road. Think for example about a dark barn. The barn is a mess. But you need to find something. You only have a flashlight. Would you be able to find what you need? Yes, you have enough light. Much can be dark in the barn, but you will be able to find what you need. Let’s now apply this to teaching children. Where would you begin in teaching them the things of the Bible? Yes, you read many histories to them. You tell them who they are before God. You say how wrong their heart is. You explain that they need to pray God for forgiveness. Are the things you tell them true? Sure. But is it everything? No. They would not be able to understand the more difficult things. But the basics are clear to them. Think about a child that scoops water out of the ocean with a cup. Is it real water? Yes. Is it all the water of the ocean? No, that would be too much. The ocean is wide and large. But what he has in his cup is real ocean water.

What then are things wherein the Bible is clear? The answer says, “the things necessary for salvation.” What is salvation? It is to be saved from sin and eternal destruction. It means that this person will be brought to eternal happiness. Jesus said, “Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and *become as little children*, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). What does this verse show? That we often think too difficult when it comes to salvation. But what does it reveal more? That every person can be saved. The Bible is enough for salvation. You

need not another book. No, you can never appear before God and say you could not be saved because the Bible was not clear. God would then say, “The way of salvation was plainly revealed. The problem is that you did not want it.” Why then do people often complain that the Bible is too difficult to read? Is it not because they do not read it enough even less study? But is their complaint true? Maybe for some. But more often it is not the whole picture. How can it be that young people can easily study difficult topics at school? That is because they are personally interested in it. This often lacks in studying Scripture. What do you need to do in reading the Scriptures? Begin with easy parts. For example, Genesis, Exodus, or the Gospel of John. Yes, the Bible has many things that we can understand with our mind. But we need more for salvation. What do we ultimately need when we read the Bible? The light of the Holy Spirit. That is why we need to pray the Holy Spirit to give light. Will He give it? Yes. Jesus said that those who will pray the Father for the Holy Spirit will receive Him. But the main issue is that there is no desire to read the Bible. There is no desire to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But are there than not things that are difficult in Scripture? Does not even Peter say so? Yes, that is what we will look at in our next question.

Q20. Doesn't Peter say that in the epistles of Paul there are some things hard to understand (2 Peter 3:16)?

A. The truth of a thing may be clearly revealed, even though the matter in itself may be difficult to comprehend.¹ That is true with all scriptural mysteries, as the triune existence of God, etc.

What does Peter say in the text mentioned? “Our beloved brother Paul...hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are *some things hard to be understood*, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest...unto their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:15-16). Paul received high education. He wrote the main doctrine of Scriptures in a very clear manner to others. And now Peter reads his letters. But he sees that certain things are difficult for him to grasp. But what was Peter? He was a fisherman and rough. He had low level of learning. What are things that Peter finds difficult? When we compare it to the previous verses, he speaks about the judgment day and the realization of the new heaven and the new earth (2 Pet. 3:13-14, Rom. 8:19, 1 Thess. 4:15). But what writings does Peter exactly refer to? He speaks of the “epistles of Paul.” That means his letter to churches, like Corinth, and other persons, like Timothy and Titus. An epistle is another word for a letter with instruction. And what is the answer?

Our answer says on Peter's complaint, “A truth...may be clearly revealed;...the matter...is difficult to comprehend.” What does this sentence mean? Simply this, a person can write things very plain, but not every reader might be able to understand. Is this possible? Yes. Think about this. A seminary professor can write a book about the sentence structure in Hebrew. His writing is clear. But do all people understand what he wrote? No. Only those with some basic knowledge of Hebrew will be able to read the book. What is the issue here? Is that the writing of this professor? No, but it is the limited knowledge of Hebrew by the student. How can this be resolved? The student can study more about the language or ask this professor to explain the matter in different terms.

But why would God allow for such difficult passages? God wants us to study His Word. He did not give an “easy manual.” We can say this, the Bible is easy enough a child can understand it and difficult enough that a professor can study it for years. What are some other reasons for difficult

¹ Literally, “...hard to be understood, as is the case...”

passages in the Bible? Greendyk points out two things. First, that someone understands that he needs wisdom from God. Second, to encourage the person to study the Bible more. If the whole Bible was easy, people would only read it once. But when one sees difficulties, he needs to compare it and study it.

When we study the Bible, do we need to do it carefully? Absolutely. Why? We see two dangers. First, some study the Bible as ‘theologian.’ They want to understand it all. They want to stand above the Bible. They desire to judge what is right and wrong. But that is not the right way to study. What does a person need to do? To accept and believe all that is written in Scripture, even though he does not understand it. We call this to be in subjection to the Word. Let us give an example. Father asks his son to cleanse the milk tank. The child does not understand why that is needed. He thinks that it is without value. What if he would not listen? Would that cause trouble? Yes. On the one hand, to his father. On the other hand, the tank is no longer usable as storage for milk. Second, others want to know things that are not revealed in the Bible. Are they elected? The Bible does not tell us. Or, what was in God’s mind from all eternity? What is the order of His thinking? The Bible is silent about that. This kind of study is dangerous. It makes blind. It reminds of an example that Greendyk gives. He says, “Let’s say that you would study the sun. You do this by staring constantly to it. What is the result? Blindness.” Well, this is also true for studying things in relation to God that are not found in Scripture. It can cause darkness and blindness.

How then do we need to study the Scriptures? Let us give you some practical tips. First, begin with prayer. This is first and foremost. We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Second, simply read the Scriptures. Begin with short times of study, like five minutes, and then built up its time, until a half our or an hour. Also, start with easy passages, like Genesis, Esther, or the gospels. Later you study more difficult passages, like the prophets and Peter’s letters. When you study, you should not forget to read also the reference texts. They can shed light upon your passage. Third, use commentaries and study Bibles. Yes, it is good to be careful. You need faithful books. Some good commentaries are those of Matthew Henry or Calvin. Fourth, read other religious books. You can also think of listening to audiobooks. For example, the writings of Ryle, and Pilgrim’s Progress of Bunyan. So, in this way, a few tips to read the Scripture thoroughly and faithfully.