

Think over what I say,
for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

2 TIMOTHY 2:7

Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees
will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God
than ten hours over your books.

“What!” is the appropriate response,
“than ten hours over your books, on your knees?”

BENJAMIN WARFIELD

Resolved:

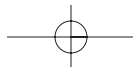
To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently,
as that I may find, and plainly perceive,
myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

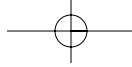
JONATHAN EDWARDS



BROTHERS, LET US QUERY THE TEXT

IF THE BIBLE is coherent, then understanding the Bible means grasping how things fit together. Becoming a Biblical theologian, which every pastor should be, means seeing more and more pieces fit together into a glorious mosaic of the divine design. And doing exegesis means querying the text about how its many propositions cohere in the author’s mind, and through that, in God’s mind.





BROTHERS, WE ARE NOT PROFESSIONALS

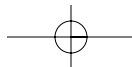
If we are going to feed our people, we must ever advance in our grasp of Biblical truth. We must be like Jonathan Edwards who resolved in his college days, and kept the resolution all his life, “Resolved: To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly, and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive, myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.”¹ Growing, advancing, increasing—that is the goal. And to advance we must be troubled by Biblical affirmations.

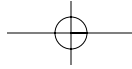
It must bother us that James and Paul don’t seem to fit together. Only when we are troubled and bothered do we think hard. Paul told young pastor Timothy to think hard: “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything” (2 Tim. 2:7). And if we don’t think hard about how Biblical affirmations fit together, we will never penetrate to their common root and discover the beauty of unified divine truth—what David calls “wondrous things out of your law” (Ps. 119:18). The end result is that our Bible reading will become insipid, we will turn to fascinating “secondary literature,” our sermons will be the lame work of “second-handers,” and the people will go hungry.

“People only truly think when they are confronted with a problem,” said John Dewey. “Without some kind of dilemma to stimulate thought, behavior becomes habitual rather than thoughtful.” He was right. And that is why we will never think hard about Biblical truth until we are troubled by our faltering efforts to grasp its complexity.

We must form the habit of being systematically disturbed by things that at first glance don’t make sense. Or to put it a different way, we must relentlessly query the text. One of the greatest honors I received while teaching Biblical studies at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, was when the teaching assistants in the Bible department gave me a T-shirt which had the initials of Jonathan

1. The seventy resolutions of the young Edwards are found in Sereno Dwight, *Memoirs of Jonathan Edwards*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), xx–xxi. This is resolution 28 from page xxi.





JOHN PIPER

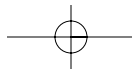
Edwards on the front and on the back the words: “Asking questions is the key to understanding.”

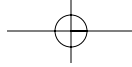
But several strong forces oppose our relentless and systematic interrogating of Biblical texts. One is that it consumes a great deal of time and energy on one small portion of Scripture. We have been schooled (quite erroneously) that there is a direct correlation between reading a lot and gaining insight. But, in fact, there is no positive correlation at all between the quantity of pages read and the quality of insight gained. Just the reverse for most of us. Insight diminishes as we try to read more and more.

Insight or understanding is the product of intensive, headache-producing meditation on two or three propositions and how they fit together.² This kind of reflection and rumination is provoked by asking questions of the text. And you cannot do it if you hurry. Therefore, we must resist the deceptive urge to carve notches in our bibliographic gun. Take two hours to ask ten questions of Galatians 2:20, and you will gain one hundred times the insight you would have attained by quickly reading thirty pages of the New Testament or any other book. Slow down. Query. Ponder. Chew.

Another reason it is hard to spend hours probing for the roots of coherence is that it is fundamentally unfashionable today to systematize things and seek for harmony and unity. This noble quest has fallen on hard times because so much artificial harmony has been discovered by impatient and nervous Bible defenders. But if God’s mind is truly coherent and not confused, and if the Bible is really His God-breathed book (2 Tim. 3:16), then exegesis must aim to see the coherence of Biblical revelation and the profound unity of divine truth. Unless we are to dabble forever on the surface of things

2. For the method I have found most helpful to interpret the Bible and fit propositions together, see John Piper, “Biblical Exegesis: Discovering the Original Meaning of Scriptural Texts” (Minneapolis, Minn.: Desiring God Ministries, 1999); and Thomas R. Schreiner, “Tracing the Argument,” in *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1990), 97–126.





BROTHERS, WE ARE NOT PROFESSIONALS

(content to turn up “tensions” and “difficulties”), then we must resist the atomistic (and basically anti-intellectual) fashions in the contemporary theological establishment. There is far too much debunking of past failures and far too little constructive, coherence-discovering thinking going on.

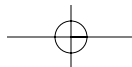
A third force that opposes the effort to ask questions of the Bible is this: Asking questions is the same as posing problems, and we have been discouraged all our lives from finding problems in God’s Holy Book.

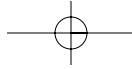
It is impossible to respect the Bible too highly, but it is possible to respect it wrongly. If we do not ask seriously how differing texts fit together, then we are either superhuman (and see all truth at a glance) or indifferent (and don’t care about seeing the coherence of truth). But I don’t see how anyone who is indifferent or superhuman can have a proper respect for the Bible. Therefore reverence for God’s Word demands that we ask questions and pose problems *and* that we believe that there are answers and solutions which will reward our labor with treasures new and old (Matt. 13:52).

We must train our people that it is not irreverent to see difficulties in the Biblical text and to think hard about how they can be resolved. Preaching should model this for them week after week.

I do not accuse my six-year-old daughter, Talitha, of irreverence when she cannot make sense out of a Bible verse and asks me about it. She is just learning to read. But have *our* abilities to read been perfected? Can any of us pastors, at one reading, grasp the logic of a paragraph and see how every part relates to all the other parts and how they all fit together to make a unified point? How much less the thought of an entire epistle, the New Testament, the Bible! If we care about truth, we must relentlessly query the text and form the habit of being humbly bothered by things we read.

This is just the opposite of irreverence. It is what we do if we crave the mind of Christ. Nothing sends us deeper into the counsels of God than seeing apparent theological discrepancies in the Bible and pon-





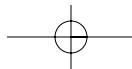
JOHN PIPER

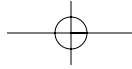
dering them day and night until they grow into an emerging vision of unified truth. For example, at one point I struggled for days with how Paul could say on the one hand, “Do not be anxious about anything” (Phil. 4:6), but on the other hand say (with apparent impunity) that his “anxiety for all the churches” was a daily pressure on him (2 Cor. 11:28). How could he say, “Rejoice always” (1 Thess. 5:16), and “Weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15)? How would he say to give thanks “always and for everything” (Eph. 5:20) and then admit, “I have great sorrow and *unceasing* anguish in my heart” (Rom. 9:2)?

More recently I have asked: “What does it mean that Jesus said in Matthew 5:39 to turn the other cheek when struck, but said in Matthew 10:23, ‘When they persecute you in one town, flee’? When do you flee, and when do you endure hardship and turn the other cheek?” I have also been pondering in what sense it is true that God is “slow to anger” (Exod. 34:6) and in what sense “his wrath is quickly kindled” (Ps. 2:12).

There are hundreds and hundreds of such apparent disparities in the Holy Scripture, and we dishonor the text not to see them and think them through to the root of unity. God is not a God of confusion. His tongue is not forked. There are profound and wonderful resolutions to all problems—whether we see them in this life or not. He has called us to an eternity of discovery so that every morning for ages to come we might break forth in new songs of praise.

I already quoted 2 Timothy 2:7. But I close now by pointing out the relationship between the two halves of this verse. There is a command and a promise. Paul commanded, “*Think* over what I say.” And then he promised, “God will give you understanding in everything.” Some people see tension between cogitation and illumination. Not Paul. He commands cogitation. And he promises illumination. How do the command and promise fit together? The little connecting word *for* gives the answer. “Think . . . *because* God will reward you with understanding.”





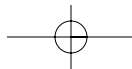
BROTHERS, WE ARE NOT PROFESSIONALS

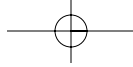
A text like this explains why Benjamin Warfield reacted with dismay at those who elevated prayer for divine illumination above rigorous observation of God's written Word and serious intellectual reflection on what it says. Warfield taught at Princeton Seminary for thirty-four years until his death in 1921. In 1911, he gave an address to students with this exhortation. "Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. 'What!' is the appropriate response, 'than ten hours over your books, on your knees?'"³

This is why the Bible has so many appeals to us that we should both meditate on the written Word of God with our minds and pray that God do His revelatory work in our hearts. "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night" (Josh. 1:8). "His delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Ps. 1:2). "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 119:97). "I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways" (Ps. 119:15). "I will lift up my hands to your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes" (Ps. 119:48). "My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word" (Ps. 119:148 NASB). "I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands" (Ps. 143:5). "Those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:5 NASB). "Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2).

To all the commands to meditate and think about God's Word, the Bible adds the promise, "The Lord will give you understanding."

3. Benjamin Warfield, "The Religious Life of Theological Students," in Mark Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1983), 263.





JOHN PIPER

The gift of illumination does not replace meditation. It comes through meditation. The promise of divine light is not made to all. It is made to those who *think*. “Think over what I say, for God will give you understanding in everything.” And we do not think until we are confronted with a problem. Therefore, brothers, let us query the text.

