

(4) How Shall We Begin to Understand Scripture?

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Understanding Scripture

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Well, in light of everything that we've said this weekend, I trust that you have a desire renewed and increased to know Scripture for yourself and this message is really, again, another completely different kind of message than what we would normally do. We want to answer the question: how do we get started? How shall we begin to understand Scripture? And in some ways, that's an odd question to ask because I realize that almost all of you in the room here have already begun. You're familiar with Scripture but we need to establish a baseline is really what we're trying to do here with this message. I'm mindful that most of you are coming off a nice meal and that that will start to settle on your stomach a little bit and I told someone beforehand, "I hope I'm not the one falling asleep during this post-lunch hour." I don't think that will happen, but think about this a little bit less. I even debated in my mind briefly about not even preaching from the pulpit but being down on the floor or something because this is more of a time like we're gathered together in a living room together talking about things in a pastoral way as opposed to trying to preach a text of Scripture.

What I want to do here in this hour is to give you some things that you can take and run with. This is not the final answer of anything. This is just something for you to take, adapt, use to your own purposes, but to give you something to put a little bit of shoe leather on what we've said here rather than leaving it in a realm of principle without giving you something to help you know how to go forward. I want to do two things here today. First of all, I want to address some unhelpful approaches about reading Scripture and then give you what I hope will be some helpful ideas that you can run with. Just a couple of simple points for now.

Some unhelpful approaches. I want to give you two unhelpful approaches, again, just trying to dial in a little bit more closely to get the radar zeroed in, lasered in on something that will hit a target for you. That's what we're looking to do today for those in the room and those of you watching over the live stream. What is one unhelpful approach to avoid? And all of this, almost all of this here, I think, is borne out of my own personal experience over time, over 30 years of being a Christian, a lot of failures, some things that have worked for me and so that's kind of what informs this here today.

First of all, what is unhelpful, don't do this? Random reading of the Bible. Random reading of the Bible. What I mean by that is don't do this with your Bible: don't just open

it up at random and wherever your finger falls that's where you decide to read for today. That's not helpful and to pick a verse, you know, people do that with kind of a mystical superstitious idea that whatever their eyes fall on, that that's the word of God that they have for them on that day and that's not right and when you connect this to the other things that we've said during the weekend, you can see why that would be wrong because that violates the interpretive principle of reading Scripture in context. We don't just open it up and randomly pick up a verse. I mean, look, let's say that that was your approach and that's what you wanted to do and you were down and discouraged and you opened up your Bible and you read Matthew 27:5 and you forgot about historical versus didactic material and you read that Judas went away and hanged himself. Is that God's word for you in your depressed state? Is that God's guidance and leading? No. That's absurd and you recognize that that's absurd, but understand that the randomness of falling on that particular verse is no different. The principle shows that you can't read the Bible randomly. It wasn't meant to be like that. It's not some kind of cheap 8 ball that you buy that has eight answers to questions that you ask. We're not to treat Scripture that way.

So don't read it at random on the assumption that God is going to speak to you that way. That's not a mature approach to Scripture. Understand this and by contrast: that understanding Scripture, becoming a student of the Bible, takes time. There are no shortcuts and so don't go for superstitious shortcuts, that will only delay things and lead you away from the truth. Understand that you should read the Bible in a systematic way. We'll have some things for you to do that with. But don't do that, don't open the Bible at random. It would be better not to open the Bible at all than to treat it like it was some kind of Rubik's Cube that you were going to play with. We honor God's word. We respect God's word too much to treat it in such a shallow fashion.

Now, another variation that I remember keenly doing because I was almost trained to do this as a young Christian, another variation is where you read a chapter of the Bible one day and then the next day you go to a completely different passage from another part of the Bible the next day and so I have journals that I wrote where I was doing this under a particular method of discipleship that I was going through and you look at it and the readings were completely random. I'm making this up. I didn't go back and exactly look at it but it was like I read from Ruth 3 and then I went to Matthew 16 and then it was 1 Chronicles 7 or something like that, and just bouncing around like a pinball going nowhere. That's not a good way to read Scripture. Again, it is not reading Scripture in context.

Now, let me tell you why people do that. Let me tell you what they're probably looking for as they do it: they want a shortcut. They view God's word as something to help them in that day and so they're looking desperately for something that will stand out. A light that will flash and warm their hearts and say, "Oh, this is for today." Well, that's not a good way to approach Scripture. Scripture is given for higher purposes than to simply give you a little emotional bump to get you through the day. That's putting yourself at the center of Scripture rather than putting the author's intent of the Scripture and saying, "I need to understand this," and recognizing that reverence for God's word means that it's going to take some time to develop. You know, there is a reason why college degrees

take two years, four years; Master's degree a total of six years or seven years; doctorates even longer. It's because the world's education system realizes that there is a sustained education that is necessary to reach a valuable goal.

Well, we don't need 7, 8, 9, 10 years before we can begin to understand Scripture because Scripture is clear and we have the Holy Spirit, but in terms of what your goal is with Bible study, this is what you want your goal to be. You want your goal to grow so that you can become a more mature student of God's word than you are now and randomly choosing things at random simply to get something that makes you feel good at the moment, that's not a mature way to deal with God's word. We need to respect it more than that.

So, that random approach fails to concern itself with the question: what did the biblical writer mean when he said that? Rather it's asking the question: what helps me today? You need to recognize the distinction and give yourself over to a respect for God's word that says, "I'm aiming my life at understanding what the Bible means by what it says," and let that encourage me as a secondary benefit, rather than saying, "This book is here to serve my emotional desires." There is more to it than that. That's not helpful. Don't read the Bible in that random way.

Now, on the other end of the spectrum, here's another unhelpful approach and that is this: it is to set unrealistic goals and to try things that are unrealistic. This is the complete opposite end of the spectrum to what I just described. A weekend like this comes with certain built-in risks, certain dangers, maybe you could say, that could cut against your long-term spiritual well being. The temptation is to set goals and to have other people define things for you about what you should do in a way that's really not realistic for you to obtain. Listen, having no idea, it was very tempting to ask people two questions. I don't want an answer. I don't want you to raise your hand, but it would be very interesting to know, first of all, do you read the Bible on a consistent daily basis or at least five, six times a week? Is it a regular part of your life? And another thing that would be interesting to know as a question that I've already forgotten before I could get it out of my lips, so let's just say there was only one question that I had in mind. Maybe the question is this: how many of you have started something with a desire to study Scripture and you had a big plan laid out and you got into it two, three weeks and you failed and you just set it aside and said, "I can't do it anymore."

Well, look, there are reasons for that, that that happens. In the pull of an emotional moment or there is a lot of information given and you want to act upon it, that desire to act upon it is good, but the thing that I think that is really important to avoid is setting up a goal that you can't keep. That's not helpful. That's not profitable and here's the thing: if you presently, if you didn't enter into this weekend with a pattern of consistently reading Scripture already, you are probably not going to succeed with an overly ambitious plan to begin with. Think about it like this with me, if you would: runners train to run a marathon over time. They start out and maybe they run a mile or two and they build up their endurance to go five or six and then ten or 12 and then 20 and then they're ready to run that 26.2 miles, but you build up to it over time. Not a one of us could just jump off of the

couch having just finished off our third bag of potato chips because the ballgame was over and then we say, "Okay, well, I'm going to go and run a marathon." That's not going to work. You're hardly going to get out of the driveway before you come back and say, "You know, there was a fourth bag of cheddar and sour cream that I might as well finish and I'll pick this up tomorrow." You understand all of that. You understand all of that, well, realize that developing spiritual discipline is something that you grow into and you do by little acts of faithfulness over time rather than saying, "I'm going to go and run a marathon," and your spouse looks at you and says, "You're 40 pounds overweight. You're not running any marathon." You're not ready to do that. Let's start with walking around the block and seeing how that goes.

Well, listen, and I debated whether to do this, whether to say this, but it needs to be said because I care about your souls and I want you to succeed going forward here. There is a system of Bible study that is suggested by outstanding men that suggest something like this and the idea is that you should pick a Bible book and you should read that same book every day for 30 days and then while you're doing that, you should read through the Old Testament, Genesis to Malachi, and be reading through that on a daily basis. When you finish the 30 days with the one book, then go to a large section and read like seven chapters of a Gospel for a period of time, 30 days, and after three years, you've gone through it all and you'll really know the Bible. Look, that's a great plan. That would be awesome if you would do that. Experience teaches me from my own failures and from that of others that I know that have tried that, that that turns out not to be too realistic. What happens is that people find that life doesn't necessarily care to conform to your daily Bible reading plan in that manner and vacations come and people get sick or you're caring for elderly parents and there's just not the opportunity to do that and what you would aspire after turns out to not be realistic because life forces you not to and while you set the goal, you have to set it aside and then you feel kind of guilty and like a failure in it. I don't think that's spiritually helpful and to try something like that, to aim that like that's what you're going to do. If you're not already in the habit of daily Bible reading, I would encourage you to set your sights a little bit lower. That might be a perfect goal but if it's unattainable, then what's perfect about it? And rather than aiming that which would impress your friends and pastor, why not aim yourself at something that's good and attainable that you can sustain over time? To me, that just seems to be the way to go.

So collectively, corporately, let me just say this: what we want to do here today is we're kind of viewing this corporately. Again, my assumption is that some of you are not consistently reading the Bible. Oh, I know what the other question was. It finally popped into my mind. You think I was stalling just until it came back. I would be interested to know, again, no show of hands, but I'd be interested to know how many of you have actually read the entire Bible? You have read through the Bible cover to cover like Genesis to Revelation or you've followed a pattern where different alternate readings and it took you all the way through the Bible? I'm sure that some of you have. I'm guessing that many of you haven't.

Well, what I want to do is I want to meet you at that level ground. I want to meet everybody there and say, "You know, let's save the grandiose plans for another time in

the future." Right now, let's meet together as brothers and sisters in Christ, meet together in this living room setting, so to speak, and say, "Where can we get started and start moving in the right direction?" and not despise a more modest goal because it's not so great, it doesn't seem so lofty, it doesn't seem so challenging and demanding, not to despise it because not to despise the good, something good because it's not perfect. So that's what we want to do here. That's what's informing my perspective here and for some people, what I'm about to propose, this is going to seem elementary, but for most of you, or at least many of you, I suspect that what we're going to have here is a step forward and that's what I want for you. I want you to take a step forward. You don't have to run a marathon, but let's get up off of the couch and take a walk around the block and start there and if we start there, then we can grow from that and we can build on that momentum. That's my perspective on it.

So what I'm about to say is this, just a little recap. Some unhelpful approaches: don't do the random reading and don't set unrealistic goals. Be mindful of where you're at now as you set goals going forward from this weekend. Now, here's the deal: what I'm about to describe is not a prophetic pronouncement. What I'm about to tell you is not, it is not, not, not...I realize all those double negatives risk canceling it out in the English grammar but you know what I mean. You appreciated that, didn't you, Colton? Because in Greek you can multiply negatives and it just emphasizes it; it doesn't negate each other. What I'm about to say is not, "Thus saith the Lord." That's not the spirit of it at all. This is, "Thus saith Don." That's all, and it's not the final word on this. It's not the only way to do it. These are just things that have helped me over time and not only that, and I hear this comment often, I want you to know that these are things that helped me and that I used before I ever became a pastor. When my schedule was like yours is now and you're up at six and you're home at seven at night and 12, 13 hours and there is just not a lot of time to sit down with ten commentaries and sort through a whole complicated passage. I get the fact that some things can be unrealistic and so I'm trying to speak from that kind of experience. These are things that have helped me. These are things that I have done. These are things that have been useful to me and I think that they'll help you too. That's the modest spirit in which I offer these things to you here today. I know that what I'm about to describe to you is absolutely attainable and that's what I want for you.

So, let's move to our second point here this evening: some helpful ideas. I gave you at first some unhelpful approaches, well, here are some helpful ideas and I think I have a total of three. Three helpful ideas for you. First of all is this: use what you already have. Use what you already have. Okay? So don't start by saying, "Okay, I've got to go out and buy ten books that I have never had and never seen and just go on a reference of somebody that I've never met and I'm going to buy those book." If you do that, you'll make the publisher happy, the author will get his royalties, but you probably won't do a whole lot with that kind of material if you just start out like that. Start with what you have. Jesus said, "He who is faithful in a little thing will also be faithful in much." Look to be faithful with what is in front of you now and start there rather than trying to immediately become somebody that you're not.

So here are some ideas on how you can do that, to use what you already have. Here's one. Well, let me just say this: in God's providence and by your own choice, you attend a teaching church. Our emphasis in this ministry is to teach God's word and that's where you find yourself. Well, let your church's pulpit help shape some direction for you. This is very simple. Periodically read the Bible book that we're preaching from on Sunday mornings. You know, we're teaching through Ephesians. Well, what a great thing it would be if once a week, every other day, twice a month, pick the frequency, I don't care, you just read through the book of Ephesians and you kept the message of Ephesians fresh in your mind and the words of the text are fresh in your mind when you come in to sit down on a Sunday morning. Well, if you're doing that periodically and things start to stick from your own reading and from the preaching of the word and then the book of Ephesians starts to really build into your life, rather than just coming in cold and you're trying to remember what was said the prior Sunday. That's perfectly attainable. Ephesians, you can read that in 15 minutes. That's one place to start.

Another thing that you could do is read the mid-week text before you come in. Do you know who reinforced this to me and who I was thinking about as I made this point? Little Sophia D. Seventh grader. Talking about our children's ministry. Do you want to know what our children's ministry is at Truth Community Church? Well, here's an idea of it, here's what happens: I was talking to Sophia on the step during our last Sunday evening fellowship and I'm sorry she's not here to say this but it would probably embarrass her if I did. I said, "Sophia, how are you doing spiritually?" She said, "I'm doing really good," in that little sweet spirit that she's got. I said, "Yeah? Tell me about it." She said, "Well, I'm reading the Bible and, you know, one of the things that I do is when you're preaching through the Psalms, I read that Psalm before I come on Tuesday night and so I'm reading that Psalm and then I hear you preach on it and it really helps me." I thought that was just so sweet and that's so perfect and for you here today, that's so attainable to just read the word before it's preached on so that it is set in your mind. If a seventh grader can do that, you can surely do that too. That's a simple thing to do that will make the preaching of God's word in your chosen church more effective in your life, so start there and follow that.

When I get back, I'm going to be gone for a week. Dan Jackson is preaching next Sunday, the 18th, and then we're going to have a guest speaker on that Tuesday. No Tuesday evening service this week, so don't show up this coming Tuesday. When we come back on Tuesday, I'm just giving you a little advance notice here so you can read it, I'm planning to start a study in the book of Ruth on Tuesday nights. Four chapters. You can read that. You can prepare for that for October 27th and just engage your heart in what your church is teaching. Well, you know, that's a good place to start. That's one way to go about it.

Now, for those of you that drive a lot or maybe you're a busy mom and you don't have a lot of time to just sit down and read and you like to listen to sermons, good for you. That's a good thing to do. I assume that you're familiar with the ministry of John MacArthur? Good. Keep listening to John. You should also check out another teacher that maybe you're not as familiar with, some of you are, but the online sermon library of

S. Lewis Johnson is a teaching resource that you should take advantage of. S. Lewis, late pastor, former pastor and seminary professor at Believer's Chapel in Dallas. His doctrine is consistent with ours, although his style is different from mine. He is a trustworthy source that I respect. You can feed yourself God's word by going to trustworthy men like that and listening to them as other things are going on.

Let me just say one other thing. As you're choosing who you listen to and you can't listen to everybody, let me just say in terms of who you listen to, look for Bible teachers rather than people who are simply commenting on current events or simply focused on single issue matters. Look for someone who is teaching you the full counsel of God in order for you to be a student of God. You know, today's headlines are going to be tomorrow's newspaper that wraps up the dead fish and so keep in mind that you're looking for an eternal perspective rooted in the whole counsel of God rather than somebody who is simply giving you commentary that you probably already agree with on modern political issues or whatever.

So use what you already have. You need an eternal perspective from the whole counsel of God, not simply a view on headlines which are going to change tomorrow. Do you have any idea what the primary news item was of three months ago? Do you have any idea what was big in the news? You know, six months ago? Whatever it was that was agitating people in the country? In the world? Locally? You forget these things. Why? Because ultimately they're passing and they're not of significance to someone who wants to be a student of God's word and so keep a perspective in mind. Use what you already have, that's the first point, first helpful suggestion, "Thus saith Don," rather than, "Thus saith the Lord."

Secondly, now this next point, I'm sorry to give you such a complicated point at the end of a long day where your stomach is full and your eyes are heavy. I'm sorry to give you a really complicated point but listen closely, point 2: read the Bible. Read the Bible. Alright? That may sound too simple but don't despise the simple things. It reminds me of the man that Elijah, I think it was, commanded to go and wash in the river seven times to be free from his leprosy and he didn't want to do it because the simplicity and the humbling nature of it was an insult to his pride, but his helper said, "No, go and do it. If he had told you to do some great thing, wouldn't you have done that? Well, why not do the simple thing?" Well, reading the Bible may sound too simple but I want you to remember and this is all connected with everything that we have said here over this weekend: the Bible is clear. You have the Holy Spirit to help you have understanding as you read and so take advantage of what God has done and recognize that you will profit by reading God's word systematically. You will be honoring the principle of context as you read the Bible from cover to cover; as you read it over time, because as you do that, here's what happens: as you do that, you will start to develop, God will build into your mind a mental framework, the superstructure of the Bible that will help you have a framework to understand individual texts as you go along. One of the great things about reading the Bible from cover to cover starting in Genesis and going through Revelation, that's not easy to do until you've done it a few times and then it starts to come more naturally, but one of the great things about it is that you start to see how Scripture as it

unfolds over time was honoring principles and things that were said in the early chapters of Genesis. So as you start to read through the historical books and Joshua and going on through there, you get into the prophets and you're reading Micah, all of a sudden it starts to stand out to you the many times that God refers to the covenant that he made with Abraham and you realize that that is a central rail on which the train of Scripture is running and you say, "I remember reading that. It was just a few weeks ago that I was in Genesis and here it is and I know what this part of Scripture is talking about because I read it just recently." There is a lot to be said for that.

In the back, we have provided little packets here in white and inside there are four different Bible plans that you can choose from. This is just something simple. If you don't do this, the elders aren't going to come knocking on your door in the middle of the night saying, "Why didn't you take one of these packets and why aren't you reading one of these Bible plans?" That's not going to happen. This is a, "Thus saith Don." Here is something to help you that there is one that will take you from cover to cover, Genesis through Revelation, the entire Bible in a year. There is another one that will alternate passages if you think the Old Testament will get kind of old before you get to the Gospels. There is an alternate in there. There is a more simple plan, you could call this the Gideon Plan in honor of Gideon's Bibles. The New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs. This would be another place, an easier, less demanding place to stop. There is a nine week Bible reading plan there. I feel like I'm on the shopping network at this point.

But that's not the point, the point here is for your well being and for your spiritual up-building and for you to realize that there are ways for you to take a step forward. That's what I want. I want you to find an attainable, sustainable step forward from where you're at to where you need to go and so these packets are out on the table out back there. You pick one up. If you're watching on the live stream, we can't get it to you unless you send us your address or something. I don't know. If you want them on the live stream and you're watching from out of town, send us a note and we'll send you the pdfs. Go to our website truthcommunitychurch.org and we'll try to help you out that way.

But look, I recommend following a plan and here's the key thing about it, whatever you choose, here's one of the key things that I want you to understand: it's not about complying with an external standard. That's not it. In one sense, that hardly even matters but why a plan? Why is that so important in my humble opinion? Here's why I say you need a plan: based on bad personal experience for a long period of time, it is very discouraging to have in your heart a desire you want to follow God but, first of all, you're inconsistent and you know that and so that starts to weigh on you, and then you get up and you sit down or maybe it's after you get home from work tonight and you open up your Bible and it's 1,268 pages and you say, "I don't even know where to begin." You don't even know where to start. That's frustrating and you spend your energy saying, "Well, should I go to a Gospel? Should I go to a Psalm? I'm kind of hungry, you know, I'll start tomorrow." You know what that's like. You know the spirit of that. That's discouraging and your energy goes day to day just trying to find a passage. Just trying to choose a passage to read. Well, a plan, whatever the plan is that you use, there are a lot of other plans, not those four that you can find, what a plan does is that you don't have to

rethink that every single day. It's already set out before you what your next reading is going to be because you have chosen a path and you say, "Okay, I'm going to follow this path until I get to the end of it."

Very simple and by following a plan, you simply trust God's providence that the next passage is the one that he has for you that day and you keep in mind the bigger picture that, "I'm trying to become a student of God's word over time and even if this seems a little bit dry and I don't understand it right now, that's okay because there's a bigger goal that I am achieving and that I'm growing on." Remember what we said many times in the realm of raising children: the growth of children is imperceptible moment by moment and day by day but over time, you start to find that that son that at one time was an infant in your arms is now four or five inches taller than you are and you say, "Where did that happen?" Well, there was growth over time and it becomes evident and it manifests itself down the road rather than immediately. Beloved, I beg you, set your goal and your heart on that goal down the road that you will be a better student of the Bible two or three years from now than you are right now. That's attainable. You can do that. Take the long view and here's the thing of it: attainable consistency is far more important than setting goals that will impress somebody else but that you don't have the capacity to keep. You won't get this all in a week, but you can do it in a year or two without feeling any pressure to perform.

Now, I didn't bring this one resource. We got out of the house a little too quickly here this morning but there is a resource that I recommend to you for reading the Bible and it goes along with some of the things that I've said about verses and chapter divisions and all of that. If you're interested in becoming a reader of the Bible, I highly recommend that you pick up, that you order a copy of what's called "The ESV Reader's Bible." It's not available in NASB, but it formats the biblical text in paragraphs rather than in separate verses. It does so without study notes and suddenly what you have is you have the pages of Scripture in front of you in a format that is not distracting and you can read it and it helps you read it in context and it draws you in and you're not seeing all kinds of numbers and little notes and all of that. That is a great resource if you want to become a reader of the Bible so "The ESV Reader's Bible." You can get it for like \$20 new. You can't have my copy because I use it every day.

So "The ESV Reader's Bible." Read the Bible. Use what you already have. Read the Bible and then, thirdly, let me just give you some other tools as we wrap this up here this afternoon. As you read through the Bible and what I want you to see is how step by step you can build into this, that you can grow into this and walk into it. You know, if your only starting point here was to say, "Well, I can read Ephesians before I come to church on Sunday. I haven't been doing that. I can do that." That's a step forward and do you know what? I know that if you start doing that, God will really bless that and it will enrich your Sunday morning worship and give you a sense of anticipation. If that's your next step, great! If you haven't been a Bible reader, getting a plan and saying, "Okay, I'm going to start somewhere and I'm going to read here and I'm just going to follow this plan until I get it done, however long that takes." That's progress. That's growth. It may be imperceptible to others but you're acting on desires that are consistent with what

should be formed in your heart after this time we spent together this past weekend and so there is kind of some stages here, really, that you can go through.

Thirdly, final thing, one final thing to say is: other tools. Other tools and that's not a very good point but I told you in advance this wasn't really a sermon so don't hold me to my lack of alliteration of the points or they don't rhyme or anything like that. We don't care about that. We're sitting around in a living room just trying to help each other grow in Christ. That's all we're doing here today.

As you read through the Bible, you will find things that you want to explore. Something will strike you. Maybe you read about the nation of Assyria and you see some things and say, "You know, I'd like to know a little bit more about that." Or you get into the life of the Apostle Paul and say, "You know, how do we fit together everything that the Bible says about his life? What can I learn about Paul?" Well, a good Bible dictionary is invaluable for things like that to help you fill out gaps of history or culture or geography. To fill in and to just let your natural curiosity as you're reading Scripture, let your natural curiosity lead you into that which you study next as you explore some of the background of the Bible and if you want a recommendation, by the way, I get no commissions on these recommendations. If you go out and buy a thousand copies of "The ESV Reader's Bible," it's not going to do me any financial benefit at all. Same for this big heavy thing here. If you want a recommendation for a Bible study, you might start with this one: the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary. Here's why I recommend this. I'm not thrilled with everything that's in it, in fact, I only recently got it because I have its two predecessors. There are actually like three or four predecessors to this dictionary and I have those and I have come to trust those and I turn to them. They're not available anymore. They're out of print and as happens with resources like this, some guy comes along and revises them and updates the information which is good and it gives the publisher another thing to sell which is good for them as well. I'm not thrilled with everything in this Bible dictionary but overall it will help you greatly with those kinds of questions and it's one pretty good resource, pretty heavy resource. It's weighing on my wrist right now as I try to hold it up here for you, but this would be a good place if you don't have any resources like that, you might start with that. It was \$28.09 on amazon.com so you could go with that as another tool to help you as you start to want to go deeper, drill deeper into Scripture.

The other thing that I would say: make good use of your MacArthur Study Bible. Do you know what? That is one outstanding resource and I would say that even if I hadn't worked for him for 15 years. That is one great study Bible with a lot of helpful things and it will almost always point you in the right direction. If you come to particular verses and you say, "I need some help understanding this verse. That seems controversial. I don't get that." To have the MacArthur Study Bible there to pick up as you're reading the Bible and to open it up and look for help on understanding something immediate, that's a great resource and if you use it in tandem with this Bible dictionary, some of the stuff in the MacArthur Study Bible will help correct the things that I would not agree with in the Zondervan dictionary here.

Here's the thing, beloved: use those two resources in tandem and you'll be off to a really good start. You don't have to go out and buy 20 books. Some of you have but you don't have to go out and learn Greek in order to study the Bible profitably. You don't. Why can I say that? Understand that there is a theological reason why I say that. The Bible is clear and the Holy Spirit dwells within you and a NASB or an ESV or a NKJV, those are good translations that show you what the original text said and if you read those as an earnest Christian, someone who is turning away from sin and desiring God's word, I promise you based on the authority of God's word that you will grow. That you will be able to understand. And what I want you to see is that these things are attainable. You can do this. We can grow together as a congregation. Maybe some of us are a lap ahead of others who are newer Christians. That doesn't matter. Let's just all get on the track running in the same direction and as we circle around, we'll encourage each other as we go.

Now, there are many other valuable and necessary resources. As I've said, I'll say it one last time: our goal here is to help people get started without setting an unrealistic bar to clear. If you were ever in track and did a high jump, it didn't do any good for somebody to set the bar at seven feet when all you could do was barely jump over a yardstick. You know, we need to set the bar where we can meet it. In fact, at track meets, they set the bar where they know the guy can clear it and then they gradually raise it. Well, let's set the bar where people can clear it and have a sense of success and progress. That's what we want and so sometimes less information is better because too much information will paralyze you into inaction and I don't want that. I want you to grow and I want you to have the sense, every one of you, every one of you without exception that's in this room, you should be walking out of here with the sense, "Do you know what? There's a way forward for me. There is something here that I can grow in. This doesn't take a lot of money and this doesn't require me to make a commitment that I know I can't keep."

So we can all take steps forward here and what we've seen in these four sessions, beloved, will change your life if you act upon it over time. It's awesome to think that you, as a young Christian, that there could be ahead of you a mature understanding of God's word based on simple steps that you take and are faithful to now. I invite you to it. The most wonderful thing in the world is to have a knowledge of God's word and to be able to turn to it in times of distress, times of discouragement, even more, to be able to know it well enough to be able to help someone else in their problem and say, "Let me share with you what God helped me with. Let me give you the comfort with which God has comforted me in a similar trial. Let me show you God's word." Well, the way that we do that is that we're reading it and we're exposing ourselves to it consistently over time.

As a closing encouragement, turn to Romans 15:4 and then Dan is going to come and lead us in a closing hymn. In one way, I feel like we're just getting started and we're actually coming to an end. I'm going to preach a special message on Sunday. Here you go. Here's your assignment. Here's your next step. Here's how you can take this and take the next step in the next 18 hours. Tomorrow I am going to preach from Psalm 19 again. I invite and encourage every one of you to read Psalm 19 before you come in tomorrow morning. You can do that. That's attainable and that will help prepare your heart for what we're going to say out of God's word tomorrow and since this is more of a little bit of a

personal informal time, I just want to say this. There is something really sweet about what's happening right now, what I'm feeling in my heart. You get started on this stuff and for me as a teacher, you want to keep going but we're at the end of our time. These four sessions are over. That's a bummer in one sense, but do you know what the sweetness of it is? It's that almost all of you belong to our church and this weekend was just one step together on a journey that we're walking together. We're united together. We're going forward. We're not saying goodbye to each other. We're really not saying goodbye to each other as we close this. This is just another aspect of God binding us together around his word and we get to continue on in this together going forward. It's not like when you travel to another state and you spend a couple of days in a place and you teach a few times and you're never going to see those people again. Do you know what? We're together. We're in this together. I think that's pretty cool. I'm really grateful for each one of you because I know you love God's word like I do.

With that in mind, brothers and sisters in Christ, let's just read Romans 15:4 as a way to encourage us and set us on the right note. Why did we spend time considering why the Bible can be understood? Who can understand the Bible? Why did we take time to consider how we should interpret Scripture? Why did we spend time today saying how can we get started? We did it for this reason. It comes down to this, Romans 15:4, "For whatever was written in earlier times," the Old Testament from Paul's perspective, from our perspective now, the Old and New Testaments, the 66 books of the Bible, why were they written? They were written "for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Praise God for his perfect word. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank you for your word and we pray that you would help us as we go forward that we might understand and apply it rightly to our lives. We ask you, Father, in the spirit of dependence upon your Holy Spirit that you would give us that encouragement, perseverance and hope that finds its source in your clear and inerrant word. For the glory of Christ we pray. Amen.