

Mark Twain said, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it's the parts that I do understand." Can anyone else relate to Twain's words?

Certainly, there are parts of scripture that are very comforting. There are those places where the scripture talks about God's willingness to forgive. There are the parts that talk about God's love for this world, and the fact that God is a Father who longs to gather us to Himself. Those are parts of the Bible we understand and find comforting.

Then there are those parts of scripture that we understand and bother us. Jesus said, "If the world hated me, it will also hate you," and, "Woe to you when all people speak well of you." Those are not very comforting words. There are also those passages that tell us that certain parts of our lives are out of line with God's plan for humanity. These passages are probably different for each of us. They challenge the areas of our lives where we have become comfortable with sin. We kind of like those parts that point out other peoples' sins, but don't like it so much when the scriptures touch our sins.

In his Second Letter to Timothy, St. Paul wrote, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness."

What does it mean to say that all scripture is inspired by God?

Some scholars have pointed out that, when St. Paul wrote these words, some portions of the New Testament had not yet been written, and the New Testament had not yet been gathered into a single collection. While that is true, I think St. Paul would say that his statement applies to the New Testament as well as the Old Testament.

All scripture is inspired by God. That means that we don't get to leave out the parts that challenge us. Because all scripture is inspired, it means that the parts that we don't like are true because the author, influenced by the Holy Spirit was speaking or writing about the mind of God. This is not to say that the author fell into some kind of trance, and the Lord took over the author's hand and when the author woke up, there was the scroll filled with words. It means that the Lord revealed His mind to the author, and the author communicated the mind of the Lord to us.

When we say that scripture is inspired, we mean that we can trust that it is true. What we learn from reading the scripture is true about us. It shows us God's plan for our lives. It shows us where we have deviated from that plan. It shows us what we can do when we discover that we have deviated from God's plan.

We also learn the truth about God from scripture. We learn about God's holiness and justice. We learn about God's involvement in human history especially in the incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ. We learn about God's activity in the past and His promise for the future, in which He has given us the promise that He is at work to make all things new. We learn about God's mercy, His unfailing love, and desire that all people would turn to Him. We can trust that the scripture gives us an accurate view of God's nature, because the Holy Spirit was at work revealing God to the authors as they wrote.

Part of what we mean when we say all scripture is inspired is that we can trust that the words of scripture are true. We also mean something more than that. We also mean that scripture is an active revelation. When we read scripture, it has an effect on us, and on those who hear it. Sometimes the words of scripture will bring comfort to those in need of comfort. Sometimes the words of scripture will bring a sense of conviction to those who need repentance. Sometimes the words of scripture will bring strength to those who need courage. Because scripture is inspired, it has the power to change us, and the power to change the world in which we live.

Scripture will have the effect of correction and reproof. When I was in college, there was a guy who used to go around using scripture for correction and reproof. If he thought you were doing or thinking something wrong, he would cite a scripture at you. If you argued, he would respond, "You're not disagreeing with me. You're disagreeing with God."

He once made the mistake of trying this with one of the Professors of Graduate Old Testament Studies. It did not go well as the Professor explained why the young man's interpretation of the verse was exactly the opposite of the correct understanding of the text.

I don't think that's what St. Paul intended for us to do when he told Timothy that scripture is profitable for correction and reproof. Remember that he did tell Timothy to be unflinching in patience. I think it might be more profitable for us to use scripture to correct ourselves rather than going around telling people how they need to correct themselves. That doesn't mean we should never confront another person, but it is probably best if we don't make that our primary mission in life. It would be very profitable for us to allow scripture to correct us when we need correction.

St. Paul also said that scripture is profitable for teaching and training in righteousness. When we read the scriptures, we don't read them only to gain knowledge. One summer, I worked on a roofing crew. When I was hired, I was required to watch a safety video. The video said that every member of the crew is responsible for safety, and if I noticed a safety violation, I needed to talk to the foreman. My first day on the roof, I noticed that most of what I had learned in the video was not put into practice on the roof. When I asked the foreman, he said, "Yeah, we don't do all of that stuff. It's a waste of time."

Knowledge is important, but if we don't put that knowledge into practice, we are missing the point. The scriptures train us to live lives that are useful to God and to the world around us. The scriptures do not simply give us the knowledge we need to win a game of Bible Trivia. They tell us how to live as God intended us to live.

St. Paul then went on to tell Timothy that a time was coming when people would reject sound teaching and accumulate teachers to suit their own liking. There have been plenty of times in the history of the church that this warning has been poignant. We might even be able to point out instances of this today. However, before we do that, it might be profitable for us to ask ourselves whether there are areas where we try to reject the authority of scripture. Are there things that we have thrown out, not because we don't understand them, but because we don't like what they tell us? Or, have we allowed the scriptures to judge us? Are we looking for teachers who will tell us what we want to hear?

Allow the scriptures to shape your understanding of who God is. Allow them to shape your understanding of how God created you to live. Allow the scriptures to shape your life in ways that are useful to God, and to the world around you. If you do, you will find that the scriptures are profitable for you.