Heart Health Series:
Give Me an Understanding Heart (Psalm 119:73)

By
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At A Glance:

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

Give Me an Understanding Heart

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Mold Warning Signs

1. Six years ago, we had a significant mold issue at the parsonage, which caused us to hire a mold remediation company. Afterwards, our bathroom and part of Caleb's bedroom had to be rebuilt.
2. Before we knew what the problem was, we were experiencing some symptoms of mold without knowing it was mold. After we had been gone for a few days, Caleb randomly threw up during the night the first night we were back home. Afterwards, he felt normal and acted like he usually did.
3. This happened on several different occasions, and we didn't know what to make of it. At first, we thought maybe he was coming down with some illness. But he didn't act sick. We didn't know how to explain what happened, so we dismissed it as some sort of fluke.
4. After we discovered the mold and started learning about the symptoms, we were able to identify several experiences we had after the fact. Had we known about the symptoms at the beginning, we may have been able to prevent some of the difficulties we dealt with. We could have prevented some of the negative consequences we were experiencing with a better understanding of what was happening. What happens in our daily lives also happens in our spiritual lives.

B. It is possible to live with negative spiritual symptoms due to a lack of wisdom without knowing the cause of those symptoms.[1] Failing to develop spiritual understanding can have devastating negative consequences—sometimes these consequences can last the rest of a person's life. Living at a time that greatly emphasizes immediate results and personal comfort causes many to push long-term personal development and goals to the side. This usually ends up causing problems.

C. Concerning the development of understanding, a significant difficulty comes from our desire and preference for immediate and direct results. Clear, direct, and immediate results are not how developing God centered understanding works. We can't say if you would spend 15 minutes a day reading your Bible you will grow in your understanding by ten percent each month. There isn't a one-to-one correlation like this for wisdom and understanding. This lack of direct and obvious cause and effect results leads many people to neglect, dismiss, and ignore the development of biblical understanding. This is a grave mistake.

D. Psalm 119:73 will teach us that asking God for an understanding heart is a foundational and important aspect of a relationship with God. Developing spiritual understanding is a core spiritual building block in God's plan, and it has been throughout human history. Seeking after

[1] Some spiritual symptoms of a lack of understanding include strong desires not being able to be satisfied (Isa. 56:11), a lack of council and direction—feeling lost (Dt. 32:28), poor judgment and decision making (1 Chr. 22:12, 2 Chr. 2:12), caught by sexual sin (Pr. 7:6-23), being loud and obnoxious (Pr. 9:13), having fun doing wrong (Pr. 10:23), the habit of despising other people (Pr. 11:12), being happy doing stupid actions (Pr. 15:21), neglecting self-discipling (Pr. 15:32), unnecessary and early death (Pr. 10:21).

and pursuing wisdom is a way in which we can pursue the heart of God. God cares deeply about wisdom and understanding (Ps. 14:2, 53:2). It is who He is (Ps. 147:5, Isa. 40:28). Disciples should direct their heart toward the development of understanding (Pr. 2:2).

II. Ask for Understanding

A. Growing into a person after God's own heart began with an attitude of dependence toward God and a request for God to clean our inner person—our heart (Ps. 51:10). Every person needs God's help to create moral goodness and a firm commitment toward God within us. God creates this clean heart by searching us and using His perfect knowledge of us to move and teach us what is good (Ps. 139:23-24). God evaluates our thoughts, stops and cleanses any hurtful tendencies and habits we have, and teaches us how to live the way He requires. Living a morally good life is a foundational element of pursuing the heart of God. So, too, is the pursuit of wisdom and understanding. God wants disciples to be good and to be smart.

B. Psalm 119, like Psalm 139, is another written record of a person's accurate and informed thoughts about God—a meditation. More precisely, these human thoughts are divinely inspired by the Spirit of God. The topic of this meditation is the word of God. In this, the longest chapter in the Bible, the word of God is described and appreciated in its many details. The prayer of verse 73 is offered in connection to appreciation for the word of God.

C. Here is the next prayer prayed in pursuit of the heart of God:

> [73] Your hands made me and fashioned me; Give me understanding, so that I may learn Your commandments. (Ps. 119:73)

D. Before making another request, the author of Psalm 119 reminds themselves of who God is and the person to whom they are talking ("Your hands made me and fashioned me", v. 73). The language here echoes the creation event (Gen. 1:26, 2:7).[2] This wording is also found in the Song of Moses (Dt. 32:6). [3] The person making this prayer request makes their request with an awareness of who God is and what He's capable of. God is the Creator of the entire person (Ps. 139:13-16). Knowing this, it would be a small and easy matter for the person who created the physical body, organ of the brain, and mental consciousness (a faculty of the soul) to fulfill the request being asked for.

E. The next prayer request, which may or may not be from David, asks for understanding ("Give me understanding", v. 73).[4] According to the Bible, understanding is a God-given perception of the nature and meaning of something, resulting in sound judgment and decision making along with the skill of doing good (1 Cor. 2:15-16, Mt. 16:3, Jn. 7:24, Pr. 2:6, 9:10, Jer. 4:22).[5] This prayer is aligned with one of the purposes for which Jesus came to earth (1 Jn. 5:20). Spiritual understanding is also the first personal characteristic the apostle Paul prayed for regarding those in the church following their commitment to Jesus (Col. 1:9). Contrary to the anti-intellectual modern church culture, developing good thinking is an important part of the

[2] J. Stephen Yuille, *The Path of Life: Blessedness in Seasons of Lament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 100, James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1007.
[3] Allan Harman, *Psalms: A Mentor Commentary*, vol. 1–2, Mentor Commentaries (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2011), 861.
[4] Psalm 119 is not attributed to David but it is anonymous.
[5] This definition was built from my own study of Biblical understanding and the definition provided in Logos 10 Bible Study Software Sermon Starter Guide Thematic Outline on "Understanding"

Christian life and spiritual growth. Disciples desperately need the perspective and understanding of God.

F. God has made us human beings with the capacity for and the purpose of developing understanding.[6] To have understanding is intrinsically built into human nature by God. Not every creature—such as animals—are created for the purpose of developing understanding, which is why they lack the capacity for it (Ps. 32:9, Job 39:13-17).[7] To live without understanding is to go against God's natural design and desire for us as human beings.[8] This is why Jesus faulted those who lacked understanding (Mt. 16:2-4, Jn. 7:24, 8:12-18). If a person does not have understanding, it is because of a defect within them (Mt. 7:1-5). Jesus wants people to see truth clearly and develop a love for it, because that is what we are made for (Jn. 18:37, 3:19-21, 2 Thess. 2:10).

G. Where does understanding, a God given perception, come from? Here is the answer:

> [130] The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple. [131] I opened my mouth wide and panted, For I longed for Your commandments.
> (Ps. 119:130-131)

H. The source of true understanding is the word of God ("The unfolding of Your words gives light; it gives understanding", v. 130). We can unfold the word of God to receive understanding by participating in the act of opening the Bible.[9] The implied consequence is to open the word of God to read and learn from it. Even though every person starts interacting with the word of God lacking intelligence and common sense, as we keep opening the word of God over time, we grow in understanding.[10] Developing understanding is a process that plays out day by day (Isa. 58:2). Every disciple needs to make a daily choice to open the word of God if they are to develop understanding. A felt spiritual hunger motivates a consistent habit of opening the word of God. Daily contact with the word of God is one of the most important factors in drawing near to God.

I. Returning to our primary text of verse 73, the word of God is both the source and object of understanding ("so that I may learn Your commandments", v. 73). By learning from the word of God, we are provided a God given perception of the true nature of things. In short, an accurate and reliable worldview comes from the Bible. As we develop knowledge and skills related to the word of God, we grow in understanding.[11] As we grow in understanding, we act the way God requires us to act by faithfully keeping His authoritative directions and instructions telling us to do something.[12] True God given understanding will always lead to a life of obedience to the word of God. Anyone who follows Jesus for a long time and does not progressively conform their lifestyle to the word of God have failed to develop their understanding.

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[6] Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms (Revised Edition)*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 873.

[7] Animals are created to operate by instinct, not second order thinking (thoughts about our thoughts). Animals at best operate with basic first order thinking (simply non-complex thoughts).

[8] This is called teleology by philosophers.

[9] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 119:130 "The unfolding of"

[10] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 119:130 "the simple"

[11] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 119:73 "learn"

[12] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 119:73 "commandments"

J. How strongly do you desire to develop a God given perception? The author of Psalm 119 desperately desired and pursued the development of understanding ("I opened my mouth wide and panted, For I longed for Your commandments", v. 131). This spiritual hunger is given by God in a small measure the moment a person recognizes the truth of who Jesus is (1 Pet. 2:2). While this desire is present, it is often not strong enough to carry a person toward a daily habit of opening the word of God. There is a season at the beginning of the Christian life in which disciples will likely have to force themselves to stay connected to the word of God without a strong desire to do so. However, we must persevere.

K. If a person responds to this new God given desire by consistently opening the word of God to grow spiritually, the small desire planted by God will grow into a strong and unsatisfiable compulsion (Jer. 15:16). As a disciple acts in obedience to God, consistently over time, God changes their heart and desires so they genuinely want what is good. As we learn from the word of God and develop the skills necessary to draw spiritual nourishment and life from it (Mt. 4:4), the time we spend in the word of God can become the best part of our day. The Spirit of God will change our heart to the point that we genuinely delight and take joy in spending time in God's word.

L. If you claim to desire growth in understanding, how does this desire influence your habits of reading, studying, and meditating on the word of God? Our desire for growth in understanding should impact what we do daily. They way we interact with the word of God is an expression of the strength of our desire for God and the development of understanding. Our desire for understanding should cause us to learn the skills needed to open the word of God for our own personal benefit. Two excellent resources for this are Howard and William Hendricks *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible* along with Rick Warren *Rick Warren's Bible Study Methods: Twelve Ways You Can Unlock God's Word*.[13]

III. Act in Ways that Develop Understanding

A. When we pray and ask God to give us the ability to understand the nature and meaning of the things that matter, it is also helpful to be aware of the normal avenues through which God dispenses His wisdom and understanding. Yes, God must provide us with understanding if we are to have it, but we must also seek it out. Praying is a necessary part of understanding, but it is not the whole. The development of understanding is one of those mysterious processes of God that require both human and divine contributions at the same time to produce the final effect. God must do His part; we must do ours. If either person fails to make their contribution, the result will not happen. God provides; we pursue.

B. Our hearts must be set on seeking God if we are to gain understanding:

> [5] Evil people do not understand justice, But those who seek the Lord understand everything. (Pr. 28:5)

C. When people's hearts are set on seeking God, they will develop understanding through the word of God ("those who seek the Lord understanding everything", v. 5). This verse is a

[13] Caution and discernment is needed when using material by Rick Warren, but this book provides accurate and helpful information on interacting with the word of God.

continuation of the previous one.[14] Those who seek the LORD are interchangeable with those who "keep the Law," contrary to those who "abandon the Law". Those who seek God are focused on and determined to conform their actions and practices to the word of God.[15] A distracted Christian life will not develop much understanding. How strong is the desire of your heart to draw near to God (Jas 4:8)? Every person is as close to God as they want to be.[16]

D. Another attitude that aids in the growth of understanding is trust in God:

> [3] By faith we understand that the world has been created by the word of God so that what is seen has not been made out of things that are visible. (Heb. 11:3)

E. Trust in God and His word, accepting it as reliable information and truth, leads to growing our understanding ("By faith we understand that the world has been created by the word of God", v. 3). This is not a blind faith that simply decides to believe something is true. Rather, there is an appropriate season of discovery and exploration to determine whether the word of God, the Bible, is providing accurate knowledge. However, once the reliability of the Bible has been realized, this attitude of trust in what God says changes how people approach the word of God in a way that increases understanding. Those who read the Bible constantly doubting or questioning what God says will not have God's perception.

F. One final attitude that deeply impacts a person's ability to develop understanding is:

> [12] Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God. (1 Cor. 2:12)

G. Understanding comes from the Holy Spirit working in us to learn the word of God ("The spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things", v. 12). This statement on the activity of the Spirit is found in a discussion on the word of God (1 Cor. 2:1-2, 2:13). Those who learn to interact with the word of God with a dependent attitude on the Holy Spirit will progress in understanding much faster than those who think they are smart enough to learn from the word of God without God's help.

H. The easiest and most basic way to start developing understanding is to stay focused when the word of God is being verbally communicated to us:

> [1] Listen, *my* sons, to the instruction of a father, And pay attention so that you may gain understanding, (Pr. 4:1)

I. Each time the word of God is communicated to us by another person is an opportunity to grow in understanding ("pay attention so that you may gain understanding", v. 1). This fatherly instruction is the word of God (Pr. 1:1-2). The reason the word of God is given such careful focus is because the person's heart is receptive, willing, and desiring understanding (Pr. 2:1-2). There is a strong internal interest to have the wisdom and understanding of God which motivates the way a person interacts with the word of God when they hear it. People pay attention to the word of God because they value it.

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[14] John A. Kitchen, *Proverbs: A Mentor Commentary*, Mentor Commentaries (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2006), 628.
[15] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Proverbs 28:4 "those who keep"
[16] By this I mean the way we act day in and day out, is a direct reflection of how much time and effort we are willing to spend on our own personal pursuit of God.

J. Specific habits related to God (spiritual disciplines) increase our level of understanding:

> [3] My mouth will speak wisdom, And the meditation of my heart *will be* understanding. (Ps. 49:3)

K. Reflectively thinking about the word of God brings understanding ("the meditation of my heart will be understanding", v. 3). Developing a regular habit of thinking carefully and consistently about the word of God greatly increases a person's depth of understanding. Finding a specific format or method of biblical meditation is one of the most fruitful spiritual habits a person can develop.[17] Spending time contemplating the truth and principles of Scripture directly contributes significantly to our understanding. Seriously applying our mind to the truth of God is indispensable.

L. Yet another way to develop understanding is:

> [6] Abandon *your* foolishness and live, and proceed in the way of understanding. (Pr. 9:6)

M. A prerequisite of being able to pursue understanding is to first let go of and move away from foolishness ("Abandon your foolishness", v. 6). Simplemindedness and the condition of lacking mental capacity and subtlety is how we normally operate in life.[18] Foolishness is the natural state that all humans are born into (Pr. 22:15). If we continue to go through life following our own natural intuitive impulses, we will never grow in understanding. Left to ourselves without direction or oversight, every person will take courses of action that aren't smart. Until a person openly welcomes the influence of God into their life, they will not be able to advance in the process of developing understanding ("And proceed in the way of understanding", v. 6).

N. The seventh and final way to grow in understanding is:

> [31] *One whose* ear listens to a life-giving rebuke Will stay among the wise. [32] One who neglects discipline rejects himself, But one who listens to a rebuke acquires understanding. (Pr. 15:31-32)

O. Being humble enough to be taught and corrected by others is another means of gaining understanding ("one who listens to a rebuke acquires understanding", v. 32). To be rebuked is to have our faults pointed out and be encouraged to stop doing what we ought not do.[19] This avenue of acquiring understanding is often rejected today. A common response to proper criticism from others is to reject it, assume the other person is wrong, get angry, and move on "not caring what other people think".

P. In each of these seven ways, a person can take practical action steps to begin developing a deeper understanding of the perspective and perception of God that is communicated through the word of God. Where do you need to start? Perhaps you need to begin by developing the habit and training yourself to pay closer attention to the word of God when you have an opportunity to hear the word of God explained to you. Or maybe you need to change your values and learn to prioritize the development of understanding higher than you currently do.

[17] A very basic method of meditation can be found on the app under the "Training" tab with the title EYE Meditation Method. More advanced methods of meditation can be learned in David Saxton's *God's Battle Plan for the Mind: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation*.

[18] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Proverbs 9:6 "foolishness"

[19] An act or expression of criticism and censure. Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Proverbs 15:31-32 "rebuke"

You could do this by looking up the passages of Scripture that explain how valuable understanding is and looking at the text that demonstrate its advantages.

IV. Conclusion

A. Every person is created by God to develop the ability to think well about what is true. God has given us His word, thousands of pages worth of insight, to help us develop an understanding mind. With the light and help God provides, a person can learn from God's word in a way that results in the ability to understand the true nature of reality.

B. When a person develops an understanding mind and heart, they will greatly benefit from the sound judgment and wise decision making that results. In the genuine Christian life, there is no room for simplemindedness, ignorance, or anti-intellectualism. Jesus' example of being a person with understanding set the standard for those who follow Him.