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Light for the Path

IF YOU EVER GET THE opportunity to visit Israel, make sure you visit Hezekiah's Tunnel—but bring a flashlight with you! Otherwise you will walk in complete darkness during your tunnel tour. The tunnel, located on the south side of the old city of Jerusalem, was constructed back in 700 BC by Israel's King Hezekiah as he was getting ready for an Assyrian invasion.

Jerusalem's major water supply at the time was the Gihon Spring, which, unfortunately, was located *outside* the city walls. That's not a good spot for your major water supply if your city is about to come under siege!

So King Hezekiah covered over the Gihon Spring and began building an underground aqueduct to divert the water to a pool (the Pool of Siloam) *inside* the city walls. One team of underground diggers started at the spring, while the other team started at the pool—and they somehow managed to meet in the middle! The finished aqueduct, five hundred yards long, was an engineering marvel in 700 BC.

Besides bringing a flashlight for your tunnel tour, be ready to walk through knee-deep, icy cold water for forty-five

minutes. I emphasize that flashlight because I remember Sue and I didn't have one when we made our trek through the tunnel a couple of summers ago. We were enrolled in a course at Jerusalem University College with forty other students, so we were counting on others in the class to come prepared. Only a few of them were. (Where are the Boy Scouts when you need them?)

It was a really, really dark and claustrophobic walk for most of the way. Our only consolation was knowing that if we kept moving forward—and the walls were so narrow and the ceiling was so low at times that forward was the only direction we *could* move—we would eventually end up at our destination. Yup, next time we'll bring a flashlight!

Turn On the Light!

Hezekiah's Tunnel is a metaphorical picture of our lives. On any given day, we can feel like we're in desperate need of light. There's a big decision looming in front of us, or we're in the middle of a crisis, or we're struggling in our parenting, or we're trying to figure out a career path, or there's conflict and confusion in some important relationship. And we're just not sure what to do next. We're *in the dark*, as the saying goes. We wish somebody would shine a little light on our path.

Well, that's exactly what God offers to do. The light that He shines is the light of His Word. In Psalm 119:105, the

psalmist says to God: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” God has given us His Word to *illuminate* our lives. In this chapter we are going to take a look at three important aspects of that illumination.

Illumination’s Source

A few years ago, the elders of our church were wrestling with a difficult situation. One of them mentioned a passage in the gospel of Matthew that he thought might be relevant to our discussion. We all turned to that text to take a closer look at it. But after we read the verses together, we weren’t quite sure how to interpret them correctly. No problem. I just pulled a commentary on Matthew’s Gospel off my shelf (a book of several hundred pages, written by a Bible scholar) and read aloud what it had to say about our passage. Unfortunately, we didn’t understand what the *commentary* had to say about the passage in Matthew that we didn’t understand. (Understand?)

Now what? Fortunately, the New Testament expert who had written that Matthew commentary is a friend of mine. He was one of my professors in graduate school. So I called him up. And I asked him for an explanation of his commentary’s explanation of our passage. We had a very enlightening conversation, after which I was able to guide our elders in applying an important principle from Matthew to our difficult situation.

Now, wouldn't *you* love to have the phone number of your very own Bible scholar/friend on speed dial? When you're reading the Bible this week and come across something you don't understand, you could just punch that number and Bob-the-Bible-Brain would pick up. Then you could ask him: "What's the deal with all those funky dietary laws that Moses recorded in Leviticus?" Or, "What does Paul mean by 'justification' in Romans 3?" Imagine having your very own Bible scholar/friend—just a phone call away.

Hey, I've got an even crazier idea! Instead of calling some modern-day Bible scholar, what if you could text your question to the *original* author of any portion of Scripture? What if you could contact Moses *directly* about those funky dietary laws in Leviticus, or ask the apostle Paul *himself* to explain justification in Romans 3 to you?

OK. I'll go one better than that—better than a modern-day Bible scholar at your service, better than a direct connection with one of the Bible's original authors. What if God Himself—who inspired those original human authors to write what they wrote—were available to explain Bible passages to you? Cool!

Well, I'm not making up this last option. Look at what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians about God's assistance in illuminating our understanding of what He's communicated to us:

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:11–14)

Now, there's a ton of stuff in these verses that I would love to unpack—but I'm only going to take the time to explain the basic flow of what the apostle Paul is teaching here. First, Paul points out that nobody knows or understands God quite like God's own Spirit (verse 11: "No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God").

Second, Paul reminds his readers that, if they're now Christ followers, they have God's Spirit living on the inside. This is one of the benefits that Jesus promises those who surrender their lives to Him. When you ask Jesus to forgive your sins and rule your life, He gives you the Holy Spirit as a signing bonus (verse 12: "We have not received the spirit of the

world but the Spirit who is from God”).

Third, Paul explains that this is the reason that some people understand the things that come from God (e.g., the Bible) and other people don't. If you've begun to follow Jesus and have God's Spirit on the inside, God's Spirit helps you understand God's Word. On the other hand, if you're not yet a Christ follower, then the Holy Spirit doesn't indwell you and it's not surprising that you find the Bible to be confusing, boring, unrelated to your life, or just plain not worth reading.

This means that if you want God's Word to shine light on your path, you first need the Holy Spirit to shine light on God's Word. (That last sentence is so important that I'm going to ask you to go back and read it a second time. Thanks.)

Theologians have a name for the truth that I'm describing here. They call it the *doctrine of illumination*. God wants to speak to you. He speaks through His Word, the Bible. But you won't be able to make sense of what God's saying until you surrender your life to Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to live in you. Have you done that yet?

YOU CANNOT make sense of what God's saying until you surrender your life to Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to live in you.

Now, please don't misunderstand me here. You don't need the Holy Spirit in order to make sense of the Bible from

an *external* standpoint. Anybody can read a Bible and understand it externally. Anybody can follow the meaning of its words, or the structure of its sentences, or the logic of its passages. However, as Martin Luther, the great reformer and theologian of the sixteenth century, put it: there's a big difference between the *external* clarity of the Bible, which anybody can grasp, and the *internal* clarity of the Bible—what it means for our lives personally—which only those with God's Spirit on the inside can grasp. (I haven't been able to track down where Luther said this. But trust me—I'm sure he said it.)

And only when you are able to grasp God's Word does it begin to grasp you. Are you experiencing this? When you read the Bible, do things jump off the page at you? Do you get excited as you come across truths that have direct bearing on your life? That's God's Spirit *illuminating* the text for you.

In fact, every time you pick up your Bible to read it, or study it in a small group, or listen to it in a sermon, it's a good idea to offer a quick prayer: *God, may Your Spirit help me understand and apply to my life what I'm about to encounter in Your Word.* I can't emphasize strongly enough how important it is to approach God's Word by prayerfully inviting the Spirit to speak to you. If you're a Christ follower, the Holy Spirit is now your internal tutor.

Of course, this doesn't mean that everything you come across in the Bible is going to be easy to understand. Yes, the

Holy Spirit is going to help you. But like any good teacher who uses an assortment of pedagogical tools to get the job done (e.g., visual aids, textbooks, lab experiments), the Spirit uses a variety of means to help you understand and apply the Bible to your life: a study Bible, a good small group curriculum, the teaching pastors of your church, and so on. But you will still be amazed—once you have the Holy Spirit on the inside—at how much of the Bible comes alive to you with no outside help.

You may have been raised in a church tradition where you were taught *not* to study the Bible on your own. Without the assistance of a priest, or a minister, or a rabbi—you were warned—you would not be able to make sense of the Bible. While I would certainly agree that gifted teachers are a tremendous asset when it comes to gaining insight from God's Word, let me repeat my point that the underlying source of all biblical understanding is the Holy Spirit. He is what you need most. And if you have Him, a good portion of the Bible is going to be clear to you without any additional input.

Theologians call this the *doctrine of perspicuity*. (It's closely related to the *doctrine of illumination*, which I mentioned

THE UNDERLYING source of all biblical understanding is the Holy Spirit. He is what you need most.

earlier.) I'll bet you don't know what *perspicuity* means. Give up? It means *clarity*. You gotta love theologians—they choose an obscure word like *perspicuity* to talk about clarity.

The *doctrine of perspicuity* expresses a great truth. Here it is (in my own words): God's Word will be clear, for the most part, to those who have put their trust in Jesus Christ. Why? Because the Spirit, as your resident tutor, will illuminate the Bible (see John 14:26; 16:13–15). And once the Spirit begins to illuminate the Bible for you, the Bible will be able to illuminate your life. You will discover, as the psalmist did, that God's Word is “a lamp to [your] feet and a light for [your] path” (Psalm 119:105).

Illumination's Condition

Let me tell you an Old Testament story about a guy named Naaman. (You can find it in 2 Kings 5 if you want to read it for yourself.) Naaman was the commander of the king's army in Aram, one of Israel's adversaries. The Bible describes him as “a great man in the sight of his master and . . . a valiant soldier” (v. 1). But in spite of all that Naaman had going for him, he had one horrific problem: *leprosy*. Leprosy was an incurable disease that could take his life.

As God would have it, in Naaman's household there was a Jewish servant girl who was familiar with the miracle-working ministry of an Israeli prophet named Elisha. When

the servant girl told her master about this potential source of healing, Naaman pulled together some money, got a letter of recommendation from his king, and made a beeline for Israel.

Arriving at Elisha's home and expecting to be personally welcomed by the prophet, Naaman was a tad insulted when a servant was sent to the door to greet him. And what was worse—the servant delivered these bizarre instructions to Naaman: “Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored” (v. 10). Well, Naaman was a proud man and the Jordan River was a dirty and unimpressive stream, so he rejected Elisha's secondhand counsel. There was no way that he was going to obey this humiliating directive. Naaman revved up his chariot and prepared to return home to Aram.

But Naaman's servants wouldn't let their boss throw in the towel. They said (my paraphrase of verse 13): “Yeah, it looks like a stupid command—dunk in the Jordan River seven times. But what harm would it do to give it a try?” So Naaman gave it a try. And he came out of the water completely cleansed of his leprosy.

Here's the point that I want to draw out of this story. As long as Naaman refused to heed Elisha's instructions, those instructions had zero impact on his life. In fact, those instructions seemed ridiculous (unreasonable, absurd, preposterous) to him. But once Naaman made up his mind to *obey* the words of

God's prophet, those instructions changed his life. It will work the same way in your life. Only when you come to the Bible with a submissive attitude will the Bible truly impact you.

If you approach the Bible with an unsubmissive attitude, not only will you gain nothing from it, you may even conclude that some of its instructions are just plain stupid. So illumination's condition is

a submissive attitude. God's Word is not going to make sense to you until you approach it with a willingness to do what it says. The Holy Spirit is eager to illuminate the Bible for those who are eager to obey it. Note the close connection between illumination and obedience in the following passage:

ONLY WHEN you come to the Bible with a submissive attitude will the Bible truly impact you.

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:23–26)

One of the Bible interpretation rules presented in *Context* is to look for repeating words or ideas. Three very significant words pop up several times in this little clump of verses you just read. Can you pick them out? One of them is “teaching” (or “teach”). Jesus is pointing out something that we already noted in 1 Corinthians 2: the Holy Spirit has been given to Christ followers as an internal *Teacher*. He is *illumination’s source*. One of His jobs is to help us understand God’s Word.

What are the other two repeating words in this passage? *Love* and *obey*. If we expect the Holy Spirit’s teaching to make sense to us and impact our lives, then we need to approach God’s Word in an attitude of loving obedience. That’s the condition for receiving illumination.

Let me illustrate the importance of meeting this condition with something Jesus said to a group of His detractors who failed in this regard: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39–40).

Do you follow Jesus’ accusation here? He’s telling a bunch of religious leaders that they don’t “get” God’s Word. Specifically, they don’t grasp what the Bible has to say about eternal life. Why not? Well, it wasn’t because they hadn’t studied the Bible. They were Bible experts! No, the problem was that they didn’t meet the *condition* for Bible illumination. What’s

the condition? You've got to approach the Bible with a submissive attitude—with a willingness to obey whatever it says. The religious leaders didn't meet that condition, as demonstrated by the fact that they refused to come to Jesus for eternal life even though that's exactly what the Bible instructed them to do!

What about *you*? What disposition do you bring to the Bible? Do you approach the Bible like it's an all-you-can-eat buffet, where you are free to take what you want and leave the rest? Don't expect the Holy Spirit to illuminate God's Word and God's Word to light your path if *that's* your attitude. In fact, I'd encourage you to confess any such attitude to God as sin. Tell God you're sorry for the arrogance of picking and choosing which parts of the Bible you're going to obey. Ask Him to forgive you, and to give you a submissive, eager-to-obey-everything-He-says spirit.

A number of years ago, I attended a pastors' conference at a well-known megachurch in California. In fact, the church had recently been in the news. A large group of pro-choice protestors had picketed one Sunday morning because the church had a reputation for teaching a pro-life position.

News reporters and camera crews from nearby Los Angeles TV stations were recording the action. The senior pastor told us of one reporter's comment and subsequent conversation. The TV reporter had stuck a microphone in the pastor's face and said,

“I must admit that I’ve been a little surprised by your church. I wasn’t familiar with it before today, so when I heard that you were being picketed by a pro-choice group, I just imagined a different sort of church than the one I’ve found.”

The pastor politely asked, “What sort of church did you imagine?”

“Well, I’ll tell you what I *didn’t* imagine,” the reporter replied. “I *didn’t* imagine a church that would have so many attenders. Why, even the local mayor goes here . . . and lots of young, well-educated women! How did you manage to get so many people to buy into a pro-life position?” (There’s no such thing as media bias, right?)

Here was the pastor’s explanation. He said (my paraphrase): “The issue is not getting people to buy into a pro-life position. The issue is getting people to submit to the authority of God’s Word. Because once they are willing to do whatever God says, then all we have to do is teach them what God says and they’re eager to obey it. So, if the Bible says that God knits a baby together in its mother’s womb before the child is ever born [Psalm 139], then our church’s members are going to protect that unborn baby!”

Did you follow that? You must choose between two approaches to the Bible. Either God’s Word is going to stand in authority over you (i.e., you’re willing to obey whatever it says), or you are going to stand in authority over God’s Word (i.e., you’ll

pick and choose what you want to obey).

Let me encourage you to go with the first of those two positions. Determine that you

will submit to the authority of God's Word. Only then will God's Spirit illuminate the Bible for you. And only then will the Bible illuminate your life.

Beware of any traces of an unsubmitive attitude—any tendencies to dismiss the Bible's directives as outdated, or ridiculous, or not worthy of serious consideration. Watch for rebellious thoughts. The Bible on sexual purity? *Nobody follows those standards anymore!* The Bible on tithing? *Who'd be crazy enough to give 10 percent of their paycheck to the church?* The Bible on forgiving those who abuse you? *You don't know my boss!* The Bible on training your children in Scripture? *When is there time to do that between sports and music lessons and family getaways?*

Keep in mind that *illumination's condition* is a submissive attitude.

EITHER GOD'S Word is going to stand in authority over you, or you are going to stand in authority over God's Word.

Illumination's Aim

We're about to take a look at one of the word pictures the Bible uses to describe itself. But before we look at this

word picture in the epistle of James, let me mention several other Bible metaphors that appear throughout Scripture. Significantly, they all describe the Bible as something that's very active, very dynamic. The Bible is not just a book that's intended to sit on a shelf or coffee table or kitchen counter gathering dust. It's God's means of accomplishing His purposes in our lives.

Psalms 119:105 describes God's Word as a lamp that lights our path. Jeremiah 23:29 depicts it as both a fire that purifies and a hammer that breaks up the hardness of our heart. Ephesians 6:17 calls it a sword that we're to use when fighting our spiritual enemies. First Peter 2:2 portrays it as milk that nourishes us. And James 1:21 paints it as a seed that sprouts to eternal life in us.

You get the idea. God intends the Bible to work us over. God's Word is meant to do something *to* us, or *in* us, or *for* us.

GOD'S WORD is meant to do something to us, or in us, or for us.

Now let's look at the word picture in James:

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away

and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22–25)

What metaphor is used to describe the Bible in these verses? A *mirror*. How can we use the Bible like a mirror in our lives? Well, there are a couple of ways to look into a mirror. The first is to cast a quick glance into it as you're walking by. You might wink at yourself, or smile . . . but that's about it. The other way is to gaze intently into the mirror in order to make some adjustment to yourself. You comb your hair, or shave your face, or pick the spinach leaf from between your teeth, or practice the hand gestures for your presentation at school or work, or evaluate how many pounds you have to lose, or try on a new outfit. Whatever. You look into the mirror with the *aim* of improving yourself.

In a similar fashion, there are two ways of looking into God's Word. The first is to look into it and do *nothing*. The other way is to look into it and do *something*. James says that we should always look into the Bible with the aim of doing *something*—making some God-pleasing improvement to our lives. The final goal of reading or studying or listening to a sermon from the Bible is not *knowledge*. It's *life-change*. Gaining

Bible knowledge is important, but only as a means to an end. The end is to do something with what we've just learned.

I am constantly promoting Community Groups (small group Bible studies) at our church. I love to see men, women, and students commit to a weekly venue where they'll dig into God's Word with friends. But surprisingly, I also do a fair amount of talking people *out* of Community Groups. Why would I talk somebody out of Bible study? Because I frequently run into people who are in multiple groups. Now, I suppose that on rare occasions it's beneficial to be in *two* groups at once (especially if you're married, and one of the groups is a couples group). But I get concerned when people confuse Bible *knowledge* (learning lots of "deep" Bible factoids in multiple groups) with Bible *life transformation* (putting what's been learned into practice).

One of my constant mantras is: *It's not how much of the Bible you get through that matters, but how much of the Bible gets through you!* If you're taking in more Scripture than you can put into practice, it would be better to scale back to one small group meeting and to focus on *walking* the Word. The same goes for the amount of Bible you import through Christian radio and the sermon podcasts of your favorite communicator. The aim of being illuminated by God's Word is to *apply what you've learned* to your life.

My best buddy in college was the wide receiver on the

football team. One day I was talking to him about the upcoming NFL playoffs—what teams I thought would win, who my favorite players were . . . that kind of stuff. Suddenly it dawned on me that this guy wasn't participating in the conversation. In fact, he didn't seem to know very much about the National Football League. So I gave him a hard time. "You're a football player and yet you hardly know anything about professional football!" He quickly retorted: "I'd rather *play* football than *watch* it!"

He's right. Participating beats observing. Don't settle for "watching" the Bible—merely reading it, or studying it, or listening to it preached. Put the Bible into play in your life. Let it always be your *aim* to come away from God's Word with an application for your life. You could even do that right now with something you learned in this chapter about *Illumination's Source* (the Holy Spirit), *Illumination's Condition* (a submissive, eager-to-obey attitude), and *Illumination's Aim* (to put something into practice). What's your application?

Perhaps you're thinking: *I'm not sure how to craft good applications from what I learn in the Bible. How do I go from text to life?* Good question. That's what we're going to cover in the next chapter.

DON'T SETTLE for merely reading the Bible or studying it or listening to it preached. Put the Bible into play in your life.

Study Guide

The *Study Guide* questions at the end of each chapter have been designed for your personal benefit. *All* questions can be used for personal study and, if you're part of a discussion group, for preparation for your group meeting. If you are part of a small group, you will find that the questions preceded by the group icon () are especially useful for discussion. Your group leader can choose from among those questions when the group meets.

Icebreakers

- Describe a time in your life when you were caught in the dark—without a light.
- When you read the Bible on your own, how often do you come away from it with a specific application for your life? (Explain your answer.)

Always

Frequently

Sometimes

Seldom

1. If a person regularly finds the Bible to be confusing, boring, or difficult to apply to their life, what might that indicate? Why?

2. Read Ephesians 1:13–14. How does a person get the Holy Spirit? What picture does Paul paint in these verses about the Holy Spirit’s role in the lives of believers? Why should this be encouraging to a Christ follower?

3.  Read 1 Corinthians 2:11–14 and Romans 8:5–17. Make a list of ways in which the Holy Spirit demonstrates His presence in a person’s life. Circle the evidences on the list that you see in your own life.

4. What do you learn in John 14:15–17, 26 and John 16:7–15 about the Holy Spirit’s role as your personal Bible teacher?

 If the Holy Spirit has been given to you as a resident tutor, how might that impact the way in which you approach reading, studying, and applying the Bible?

Walk

5. What is the *condition* you must meet in order for the Holy Spirit to illuminate God's Word for you? What might be some indications of such an attitude on your part?

6.  What has been one or two of the hardest lessons for you to learn from God's Word? Why were they so difficult to apply?

7. What does Paul warn us *not* to do to the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 4:30? Read the surrounding context to this verse (vv. 25–32) and note the sorts of behaviors that would do this to God's Spirit.

 How might grieving the Holy Spirit affect His role as your teacher and illuminator of God's Word?

8.  Explain how the Bible serves as a mirror in the life of a Christ follower.

What are some tips for using the Bible as a mirror that you pick up in James 1:22–25?

In the very next verses (James 1:26–27), what are some of the changes that James says should be made in our lives after looking into the mirror of God's Word?

9.  What is something you will *start* doing or *stop* doing as an application of this chapter?