

The definition of our words can make a world of a difference.

Proverbs 18:21 – *words can bring death or life!*

We often make this verse about the totality of our words and what comes out of our mouth. But what about *each* word?

The poet Christian Wiman asked the question that stirred the pot for this series:

"Does the decay of belief among educated people in the West precede the decay of language used to define and explore belief, or do we sense the fire of belief fading in us only because the words are sodden with overuse and imprecision and will not burn?"

Put in simpler terms by the writer David Brooks: *"Many adults hunger for meaning and goodness, but lack a spiritual vocabulary to think things through."*

Luckily Jesus gives us so much teaching right here in scripture to come to deeper understanding.

John 6 – Jesus is being followed by massive crowds. Thousands of people were flocking to Jesus, following him, and waiting on and anticipating his rise as Messiah.

Here Jesus speaks so mysteriously that in John 6:60 it tells us

Many of his disciples said, "This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?"

So they don't accept it. They reject it.

And it's here in John 6 that we get what I've heard called the saddest words in the Bible:

At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him.

Another translation – *"they never walked with him again."*

God in the flesh is right in front of them. Events that would change all of human history were around the corner. And they walk away because they're confused and confounded.

John 6:67-69

... Then Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, "Are you also going to leave?" Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God."

Jesus's teaching here is mysterious. It isn't crystal clear.

The twelve show real faith by sticking around even when everything doesn't make sense.

We don't understand everything. But we understand enough to follow. To know you have life.

In a similar situation thousands of years ago and hundreds of pages to the left in our Bibles:

At the end of Deuteronomy Moses has outlined the instruction for Israel.

- You are about to enter into a covenant with God.
- You don't have the heart to keep this covenant.
- God's going to be gracious anyways and make us His people.
- But don't take this gracious kindness for weakness and think you can walk in sin.
- And then – finally – God promises that judgment is coming.

Wait... what?

You can hear echoes of John 6 – ***“This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?”***

Deuteronomy 29:29

The Lord our God has secrets known to no one. We are not accountable for them, but we and our children are accountable forever for all that he has revealed to us, so that we may obey all the terms of these instructions.

The thought is God doesn't tell us everything. But he tells us enough to live the way we're called to live. You have all you need. Cling to it and obey it.

Yet if we are honest in our reading of scripture, or as we follow Christ and live for him... there are moments where we say like those in John 6 – ***“this is very hard to understand.”***
We can get offended. Why does God allow this, why would God do that...

I want to look at three words tonight that are helpful as we follow Jesus.
So the saddest words in scripture will never be spoken about us.

MYSTERY

By definition a mystery is something that is difficult or impossible to understand or explain

We like mystery as a genre. Murder mysteries. Law & Order. Sherlock. The mystery gets solved. But actual mysteries? We as a culture don't like mystery.

We are a product of the **enlightenment** era. The cry of enlightenment was and is *“we can figure it out.”* We can know what's going on.

But the revivalist **John Wesley** once said of Deuteronomy 29:29:

“...the ways and judgments of God... are often times hidden from us, unsearchable by our shallow capacities, and matter for our adoration, not our enquiry.

Albert Einstein – “He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand in rapt awe is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.”

In Romans Paul puts a bow on his thoughts on salvation history and God's plan for redemption by leading the reader into an outburst of, amazement, awe and worship. It's a pause to behold.

Romans 11:33 - *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!*

The MSG version of Romans 11:13 reads - *“It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out.”*

This is a show of theological humility from Paul – one of the greatest theological minds in history. It's like Thomas Aquinas once said:

“the highest knowledge of God is to know that we don't know God”.

Embracing mystery- having theological humility that knows we'll never know it all - is a sign of spiritual maturity.

Mystery doesn't just produce worship. Mystery should produce humility.

We're all trying to plumb the depths of God's character and truth.

We should recognize the truth of **Deuteronomy 29:29**

The things that are clear we obey.

But some things are a mystery.

The influence of enlightenment means that we want to dial in every prophecy and page.

We can get so caught up in the **obscure** that we miss the **obvious**.

So caught up in the **mystery** that we lose grip on what's **mandatory**.

My duty is what God has made plain.

Everything else is his responsibility.

It runs counter to culture, but we should embrace mystery.

It breeds a **healthy humility**.

And it **produces the wonder that produces worship**.

Dennis Covington once said:

"Mystery is not the absence of meaning, but the presence of more meaning than we can comprehend."

DOUBT

If we can't be certain of God's mysteries, the natural result is that we will have doubts.

Doubt is by definition to be uncertain of something.

Simon Sinek – *"I'm always nervous about people who aren't curious about anything in the world."*

I'd echo that and say I'd be concerned with any Christian who isn't confounded, frustrated, or at least curious about some aspect worshipping an eternal, infinite God.

If you *don't* question God or have questions about God, that should make you uncomfortable.

We shouldn't fear questions. We should be full of them.

But we're taught in church culture to have a fear of doubts.

Doubt by definition is "feeling uncertain about something."

Doubt in and of itself isn't good or bad. It's neutral.

It's simply a lack of knowledge that can go either way.

You know what would be bad?

If we as finite people felt certain about our grasp of an infinite God. Because we'd for sure be wrong. Questions can be sincere, and asking them is an act of faith.

Tim Keller - *"A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it."*

Doubt isn't the enemy of faith.

There's a lack of doubt that can harm our faith.

So many folks stop growing because they stop wrestling.
We should wrestle and engage our doubts.

Proverbs 25:2 - *It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.*

Don't suppress your doubts thinking they are bad. Get to searching.

I think of the lyric the songwriter Dustin Kensrue wrote inspired by Job:
*"All that I have is questions, so much is veiled in mystery.
You are yourself the answer. The only answer that I need."*

But as we lean into mystery, I think it's important to consider: **APOLOGETICS**
reasoned arguments or writings in justification of something, typically a theory or religious doctrine.

Arguing for truth in a culture whose word of the year just a couple years ago was "post-truth" gets tricky. We need an apologetic for apologetics.

The key contribution of apologetics is that it raises the level of people's critical thinking. They ask hard questions and seek clear answers. It helps them to engage with those doubts. And they dismantle lies and untruths of the enemy. These are good things.

An increased confidence in the authority and reliability of Scripture is always a good thing.

But trying to drag pull everything in the Bible into full understanding through reason is a trap... God is bigger... it's like trying to put an elephant under a microscope. He won't fit.

To chalk things up as a mystery is also a trap –
The trap I often fall into is thinking – *"well it's a mystery. We can't know."*
...so I stop thinking about it altogether.

What we need is a *curious conviction* that recognizes there is truth we are accountable to and mysteries we surrender to. And in it all, curious conviction keeps us in pursuit.

We need to be **honest** about what the Bible tell us.
We need to be **humble** about what it doesn't.

Paul- the same man who throws his hands up at the mysteries of God's plan and will in Romans 11 - repeats one thing again and again in his letters.
Those mysteries? They're revealed in Christ.

Colossians 2:2 - *that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ*

And this is eternal life – from the mouth of Jesus in John 17 - that we may know Him.
We get to know Jesus, the mystery of God.

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan Friar is on record as saying that the mysteries of god aren't *unknowable*. They are *infinitely knowable*.

We read John 6 and think *I'd never stop following Jesus*.

We quote Peter – "*Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life.*"

Yet how many have abandoned his words?

If he has the words that give eternal life... why aren't we reading them?

Why is some 80% of the church in America not cracking their Bible open outside of a weekend service?

Let's be the 20%.

Yet the Bible isn't a textbook with the answers in the back.

It is as good at raising questions as it is giving answers.

And there will inevitably be times in our walk where we throw our hands up like Christ's disciples in John 6 and ask... "*This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?*"

But I never want what was said of that crowd to be said of me – he stopped following.

Too many stop growing because they stop wrestling. They stop searching.

Deuteronomy 29:29 - We ARE held accountable FOREVER for what he's revealed.

I want to be able to stand before God on judgment day, and I'll have my load of questions like we all have our pet questions, but the confession of my life will be – this is what you revealed to me, and I built my life on it.

I never let what I don't understand keep me from obeying what I do understand.

I never let what wasn't revealed keep me from obeying what was revealed.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:12

Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.