

READING THE BIBLE

Reading the Bible Theologically

To read the Bible “theologically” means to read the Bible “with a focus on God”: his being, his character, his words and works, his purpose, presence, power, promises, and precepts. The Bible can be read from different standpoints and with different centers of interest, but this article seeks to explain how to read it theologically.

The Bible: The Church’s Instruction Book

All 66 books of the Bible constitute the book of the Christian church. And the church, both as a whole and in the life of its members, must always be seen to be the people of the book. This glorifies God, its primary author.

God has chosen to restore his sin-spoiled world through a long and varied historical process, central to which is the creating—by redemptive and sanctifying grace—of what is literally a new human race. This unfinished process has so far extended over four millennia. It began with Abraham; it centers on the first coming of the incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ; and it is not due for completion till he comes again. Viewed as a whole, from the vantage point of God’s people within it, the process always was and still is covenantal and educative. *Covenantal* indicates that God says to his gathered community, “I am your God; you shall be my people,” and with his call for loyalty he promises them greater future good than any they have yet known. *Educative* indicates that, within the covenant, God works to change each person’s flawed and degenerate nature into a new, holy selfhood that expresses in responsive terms God’s own moral likeness. The model is Jesus Christ, the only perfect being that the world has ever seen. For God’s people to sustain covenantal hopes and personal moral ideals as ages pass and cultures change and decay, they must have constant, accessible, and authoritative instruction from God. And that is what the Bible essentially is.

This is why, as well as equipping everywhere a class of teachers who will give their lives to inculcating Bible truth, the church now seeks to translate the Bible into each person’s primary language and to spread universal literacy, so that all may read and understand it.

The Bible Is Canonical

God’s plan is that through his teaching embodied in the Bible, plus knowledge and experience of how he rewards obedience and punishes disobedience in a disciplinary way, his people should learn love, worship, and service of God himself, and love, care, and service of others, as exemplified by Jesus Christ. To this end each generation needs a written “textbook” that sets forth for all time God’s unchanging standards of truth, right, love and goodness, wisdom and worship, doctrine and devotion. This resource will enable people to see what they should think and do, what ideals

they should form, what goals they should set, what limits they should observe, and what life strategies they should follow. These are the functions that are being claimed for the Bible when it is called “canonical.” A “canon” is a rule or a standard. The Bible is to be read as a God-given rule of belief and behavior—that is, of faith and life.

The Bible Is Inspired

Basic to the Bible’s canonical status is its “inspiration.” This word indicates a divinely effected uniqueness comparable to the uniqueness of the person of the incarnate Lord. As Jesus Christ was totally human and totally divine, so is the Bible. All Scripture is witness to God, given by divinely illuminated human writers, and all Scripture is God witnessing to himself in and through their words. The way into the mind of God is through the expressed mind of these human writers, so the reader of the Bible looks for that characteristic first. But the text must be read, or reread, as God’s own self-revelatory instruction, given in the form of this human testimony. In this way God tells the reader the truth about himself; his work past, present, and future; and his will for people’s lives.

The Bible Is Unified

Basic also to the Bible’s canonical status is the demonstrable unity of its contents. Scripture is no ragbag of religious bits and pieces, unrelated to each other; rather, it is a tapestry in which all the complexities of the weave display a single pattern of judgment and mercy, promise and fulfillment. The Bible consists of two separate collections: the OT, written over a period of about 1,000 years, and the NT, written within a generation several centuries after the OT was completed. Within such a composite array one would expect to find some crossed wires or incoherence, but none are found here. While there are parallel narratives, repetitions, and some borrowings from book to book, the Bible as a whole tells a single, straightforward story. God the Creator is at the center throughout; his people, his covenant, his kingdom, and its coming king are the themes unfolded by the historical narratives, while the realities of redemption from sin and of godly living (faith, repentance, obedience, prayer, adoration, hope, joy, and love) become steadily clearer. Jesus Christ, as fulfiller of OT prophecies, hopes, promises, and dreams, links the two Testaments together in an unbreakable bond. Aware that at the deepest level the whole Bible is the product of a single mind, the mind of God, believers reading it theologically always look for the inner links that bind the books together. And they are there to be found.

Theological Reading of the Bible: A Quest for God

Reading Scripture theologically starts from the truths reviewed above: (1) that the Bible is a God-given guide

to sinners for their salvation, and for the life of grateful godliness to which salvation calls them; (2) that the Bible is equally the church's handbook for worship and service; (3) that it is a divinely inspired unity of narrative and associated admonition, a kind of running commentary on the progress of God's kingdom plan up to the establishing of a world-embracing, witnessing, suffering church in the decades following Christ's ascension and the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit; and (4) that the incarnate Son of God himself, Jesus the Christ, crucified, risen, glorified, ministering, and coming again, is the Bible's central focus, while the activities of God's covenant people both before and after Christ's appearing make up its ongoing story. Theological reading follows these leads and is pursued theocentrically, looking and listening for God throughout, with the controlling purpose of discerning him with maximum clarity, through his own testimony to his will, works, and ways. Such reading is pursued prayerfully, according to Martin Luther's observation that the first thing one needs to become a theologian through Bible reading is prayer for the illumination and help of the Holy Spirit. And prayerful theological Bible reading will be pursued in light of three further guiding principles, as follows.

First, *revelation was progressive*. Its progress, in its written form, was not (as has sometimes been thought) from fuzzy and sometimes false (OT) to totally true and clear (NT), but from partial to full and complete. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days [the concluding era of this world's life] he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). In the Gospels, the Epistles, and the books of Acts and Revelation, readers are now faced with God's final word to the world before Christ comes again. Theological Bible reading maintains this perspective, traversing the OT by the light of the NT.

Second, *the Bible's God-language is analogical*. Today's fashion is to call it "metaphorical," which is not wrong, but "analogical" is the term that makes clearest the key point: the difference involved when everyday words—nouns, verbs, adjectives—are used of God. Language is God's gift for personal communication between humans and between God and humans. But when God speaks of himself—or when people speak to him or about him—the definitions, connotations, implications, valuations, and range of meaning in each case must be adjusted in light of the differences between him and his creation. God is infinite and flawless; people are both finite and flawed. So when everyday words are used of God, all thought of finiteness and imperfection must be removed, and the overall notion of unlimited, self-sustaining existence in perfect loving holiness must be added in. For instance, when God calls himself "Father," or his people in response call him their "Father," the thought will be of authoritative, protecting, guiding, and enriching love, free from any lack of wisdom that appears in earthly fathers. And when one speaks of God's "anger" or "wrath" in retribution for sin that he as the world's royal Judge displays, the thought will be as free from the fitful inconsistency, irrationality, bad temper, and loss of self-control that regularly mars human anger.

These mental adjustments underlie the biblical insistence that all God's doings, even those that involve human distress, are glorious and praiseworthy. This doxological, God-glorifying tone and thrust marks even books such as

Job and Lamentations, and the many complaint prayers in the Psalter. The Bible writers practice analogical adjustment so smoothly, unobtrusively, and unselfconsciously that it is easy to overlook what they are doing. But the theological reader of the Bible will not miss this point.

Third, *the one God of the Bible is Trinitarian and triune*. God is three persons in an eternal fellowship of love and cooperation within the one divine Being. Each person is involved in all that God does. God is a team no less than he is a complex entity. In the NT this concept is apparent, but in the OT, where the constant emphasis is on the truth that Yahweh is the one and only God, the truth of the Trinity hardly breaks the surface. God's triunity is, however, an eternal fact, though it has been clearly revealed only through Christ's coming. Theological Bible readers are right to read this fact back into the OT, following the example of NT writers in their citing of many OT passages.

Theological Reading of the Bible: The Quest for Godliness

Theology is for doxology, that is, glorifying God by praise and thanks, by obedient holiness, and by laboring to extend God's kingdom, church, and cultural influence. The goal of theological Bible reading is not just to know truth about God (though one's quest for godliness must start there) but to know God personally in a relationship that honors him—which means serving Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, the world's real though unrecognized Lord, who came to earth, died, rose, and ascended for his people, and has given them the Holy Spirit. To have him fill believers' horizons and rule their lives in his Father's name is the authentic form—the foundation, blueprint, scaffolding, and construction—of Christian godliness, to which theological Bible reading is a God-intended means. So, three questions must govern readers of the inspired Word:

First, in the passage being read, *what is shown about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?* What does it say about what the holy Three are doing, have done, and will do in God's world, in his church, and in lives committed to him? What does it reveal about God's attributes, that is, God's power and character, how he exists and how he behaves? One reason, no doubt, for God's panoramic, multigenred layout of the Bible—with history, homily, biography, liturgy, practical philosophy, laws, lists, genealogies, visions, and so on, all rubbing shoulders—is that this variety provides so many angles of illumination on these questions for theological Bible readers' instruction.

Second, in the passage being read, *what is shown about the bewildering, benighted world with all its beautiful and beneficial aspects alongside those that are corrupt and corrupting?* Discerning the world's good and evil for what they are, so as to embrace the world's good and evade its temptations, is integral to the godliness that theological Bible reading should promote.

Third, in the passage being read, *what is shown to guide one's living, this day and every day?* The theological logic of this question, through which the reader must work each time, is this: since God, by his own testimony, said *that* to those people in their situation, what does it follow that he says to readers today in their own situation? The Holy Spirit answers prayer by giving discernment to apply Scripture in this way. Those who seek will indeed find. ◀

Reading the Bible as Literature

Three primary modes of writing converge in the Bible: theological, historical, and literary. Overwhelmingly, theology and history are embodied in literary form.

A crucial principle of interpretation thus needs to be established at the outset: meaning is communicated *through form*, starting with the very words of a text but reaching beyond that to considerations of literary genre and style. We cannot properly speak about the theological or moral content of a story or poem (for example) without first interacting with the story or poem.

Literary form exists prior to content; no content exists apart from the form in which it is embodied. As a result, the first responsibility of a reader or interpreter is to understand the form of a discourse. It is a common misconception to think that the literary dimension of the Bible is *only* the form in which the message is presented. Actually, without some kind of literary form, the content would not even exist. The concept of literary form needs to be construed very broadly here. Anything having to do with *how* a biblical author has expressed his message constitutes literary form. We tend to think (erroneously) that authors tell us *about* characters, actions, and situations, whereas actually they speak *with* or *by means of* these things—*about* God, people, and the world.

The Bible as Literature

The idea of the Bible as literature began with the Bible itself. The writers refer to a whole range of literary genres in which they write: proverb, saying, chronicle, complaint (lament psalm), oracle, apocalypse, parable, song, epistle, and many others. Secondly, some of these forms correspond to the literary forms current in the authors' surrounding cultures. For example, the Ten Commandments are cast in the form of the suzerainty treaties that ancient Near Eastern kings imposed on their subjects, and the NT epistles show many affinities to the structure of Greek and Roman letters of the same era.

Mainly, though, we can look to the Bible itself to see the extent to which it is a literary book. Virtually every page of the Bible is replete with literary technique, and to possess the individual texts fully, we need to read the Bible as literature, just as we need to read it theologically and (in the narrative parts) historically.

Literary Genres

The most customary way to define literature is by the external genres (types or kinds of writing) in which its content is expressed. The two main genres in the Bible are narrative and poetry. Numerous categories cluster under each of these. Narrative subtypes, e.g., include hero story, gospel, epic, tragedy, comedy (a U-shaped plot with a happy ending), and parable. Specific poetic genres keep multiplying as well: lyric, lament psalm, praise psalm, love poem, nature poem, *epithalamion* (wedding poem), and many others.

But those are only the tip of the iceberg. In addition to narrative and poetry, we find prophecy, visionary writing, apocalypse, pastoral, encomium, oratory, drama (the book of Job), satire, and epistle. Then if we add more specific forms like travel story, dramatic monologue, doom song,

and Christ hymn, the number of literary genres in the Bible readily exceeds a hundred.

The importance of genre to biblical interpretation is that genres have their own methods of procedure and rules of interpretation. An awareness of genre should alert us to what we can expect to find in a text. Additionally, considerations of genre should govern the terms in which we interact with a text. With narrative, e.g., we are on the right track if we pay attention to plot, setting, and character. If the text before us is a satire, we need to think in terms of object of attack, the satiric vehicle in which the attack is couched, and satiric norm (stated or implied standard by which the criticism is being conducted).

In view of how many literary genres are present in the Bible, it is obvious that the overall literary form of the Bible is the anthology, as even the word Bible (Gk. *biblia*, "books") hints. As an anthology, the Bible possesses the same kinds of unity that other anthologies exhibit: multiple authorship (approximately three dozen authors), diverse genres, a rationale for collecting these particular materials (a unifying religious viewpoint and story of salvation history), comprehensiveness, and an identifiable strategy of organization (a combination of historical chronology and groupings by genre).

Literary Subject Matter

Literature is also identifiable by its subject matter. It is differentiated from expository (informational) writing by the way in which it presents concrete human experience instead of stating abstract propositions, logical arguments, or bare facts. We can profitably think of biblical writing as existing on a continuum, with abstract propositional discourse on one end and concrete presentation of human experience on the other. The more thoroughly a piece of writing falls on the experiential end of the spectrum, the more "literary" it is.

To illustrate, the command "you shall not murder" is an example of expository discourse. The story of Cain and Abel embodies the same truth in the form of characters in concrete settings performing physical and mental actions. Expository writing gives us the precept; literature gives us the example. "God's provision extends to all aspects of our lives" is a thematic summary of Psalm 23; rather than such abstraction, however, the psalm incarnates the truth about providence through the poetic image of a shepherd's daily routine with his sheep.

The subject of literature is human experience rendered as concretely as possible. The result is that it possesses a universal quality. Whereas history and the daily news tell us what *happened*, literature tells us what *happens*—what is true for all people in all places and times. A text can be both informational and literary, but its literary dimension resides in its embodiment of recognizable human experience.

The goal of literature is to prompt a reader vicariously to share or relive an experience. The truth that literature imparts is not simply ideas that are true but *truthfulness to human experience*. The implication for interpreting the Bible as literature is that readers and expositors need to actively recreate experiences in their imaginations, identify the recognizable human experiences in a text (thereby

building bridges to life in the modern world), and resist the impulse immediately to reduce every biblical passage to a set of theological ideas.

Archetypes and Motifs

An archetype is a plot motif (such as initiation or quest), character type (such as the villain or trickster), or image (such as light or water) that recurs throughout literature and life. The presence of archetypes signals a text's literary quality. When we read literature, we are continuously aware of such archetypes as the temptation motif, the dangerous valley, and the hero, whereas with other types of writing we are rarely aware of archetypes.

Archetypes are the building blocks of literature. The Bible is the most complete repository of archetypes in the Western world, something that makes the Bible universal, reaching down to bedrock human experience. Awareness of archetypes helps us see the unity of the Bible (since we keep relating one instance of an archetype to other instances), and also the connections between the Bible and other literature.

Stylistics and Rhetoric

Literature also uses distinctive resources of language that set it apart from ordinary expository discourse. The most obvious example is poetry. Poets speak a language all their own, consisting of images and figures of speech. Other important examples include: imagery, metaphor, simile, symbol, allusion, irony, wordplay, hyperbole, apostrophe (direct address to someone or something absent as though present), personification, paradox, and pun. The presence of these elements push a text into the category of literature.

The most concentrated repository of such language in the Bible is the books that are poetic in their basic format—the Prophetic Books, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (a book of prose poems), Song of Solomon, and Revelation. But literary resources of language also appear on virtually every page of the Bible beyond the poetic books—most obviously in the discourses of Jesus and in the Epistles, but less pervasively in the narratives as well.

A related literary phenomenon is rhetoric—arrangement of content in patterns and use of conventional

literary techniques or formulas. Parallelism of sentence elements, e.g., is an instance of stylized rhetoric. Patterns of repetition—of words, phrases, or content units—are a distinguishing feature of the Bible. So is aphoristic conciseness that continuously raises the Bible to a literary realm of eloquence far above everyday discourse. A page from a NT epistle might include rhetorical questions, question-and-answer constructions, direct addresses to real or imaginary respondents, or repeated words or phrases.

Artistry

Literature is an art form in which beauty of expression, craftsmanship, and verbal virtuosity are valued as self-rewarding and as an enhancement of effective communication. The writer of Ecclesiastes states his philosophy of composition, portraying himself as a self-conscious stylist and wordsmith who arranged his material “with great care” and who “sought to find words of delight” (Eccles. 12:9–10). Surely other biblical writers did the same.

The standard elements of artistic form include unity, theme-and-variation, pattern, design, progression, contrast, balance, recurrence, coherence, and symmetry. Authors cultivate artistry because it is important to their effect and intention. The Bible is an aesthetic as well as utilitarian book, and we need to experience it as such.

Reading and Interpreting the Bible as Literature

Any piece of writing needs to be interpreted in terms of the kind of writing that it is. The Bible is a literary book in which theology and history are usually embodied in literary forms. Those forms include genres, the incarnation of human experience in concrete form, stylistic and rhetorical techniques, and artistry.

These literary features are not extraneous aspects of the text. Instead, they are the forms *through which* the content is mediated. If the writing of the Bible is the product of divine inspiration—if it represents what the Holy Spirit prompted the authors to write as they were “carried along” (2 Pet. 1:21)—then the literary forms of the Bible have also been inspired by God and need to be granted an importance congruent with that inspiration. ◀

Reading the Bible in Prayer and Communion with God

Communion with God is a staggering thought. God created billions of galaxies and calls every star by name (Isa. 40:26; 42:5). He never had a beginning and will never end (Ps. 90:2). His ways are inscrutable and his judgments unsearchable (Rom. 11:33). His thoughts are as different from ours as the heavens are high above the earth (Isa. 55:8). “The nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales” (Isa. 40:15).

If that were not enough to make communion with God unthinkable, consider that all of us are naturally rebellious against him. Therefore, his omnipotent wrath rests on us. We are by nature hostile to God and do not submit to his law (Rom. 8:7). Therefore, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against us (Rom. 1:18). We are “by nature children of wrath,” “sons of disobedience,” and “dead in . . . trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1–5). How then can there be any thought of communion with God?

For Our Joy

Before we see the Bible's answer, let's clarify what we mean by “communion.” Communion refers to God's communication and presentation of himself to us, together with our proper response to him with joy. We say “with joy” because it would not be communion if God revealed himself in total wrath and we were simply terrified. That would be *true* revelation and a *proper* response, but it would not be communion.

Communion assumes that God comes to us in love and that we respond joyfully to the beauty of his perfections and the offer of his fellowship. He may sometimes come with a rod of discipline. But even in our tears, we can rejoice in our Father's loving discipline (Heb. 12:6–11). Communion with God may lay us in ashes or make us leap. But it never destroys our joy. It *is* our joy (Ps. 43:4).

To God's Glory

Communion with God is the end for which we were created. The Bible says that we were created for the glory of God (Isa. 43:7). Yet glorifying God is not something we do *after* communing with him, but *by* communing with him. Many human deeds magnify the glory of God's goodness, but only if they flow from our contentment in communion with him. This is why we pray, "*Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love*" (Ps. 90:14). The joy of this communion in the love of God confirms God's worth and shows his glory.

Because of the Gospel

But how is this unthinkable privilege of communion with God possible for sinners like us? The answer of the Bible is that God himself took the initiative to be reconciled to his enemies. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place and bear the curse that we deserved from God. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). So the wrath of God that we deserved fell on Christ (Isa. 53:4–6, 10).

Because God gave Christ as our substitute, we can be reconciled to God and enjoy peaceful communion with him. "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10). "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1). This peace leads to the unparalleled joy of communion with God (Rom. 5:11).

The Gospel: The Bible's Central Message

Therefore, the first thing to say about the Bible in relation to communion with God is that the message of how to be reconciled to God for the glory of God is the central message of the Bible. There is no communion with God without salvation from *our* sin and *God's* wrath. The Bible is the only book with final authority that tells us what God did through Christ and how we must respond through faith to be saved and to enjoy communion with God (2 Tim. 3:15).

But the Bible is more. The Bible tells the story of creation, of the fall of humanity into sin, and of the history of God's chosen people Israel leading up to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Then it recounts the life of Christ and his teachings, his mighty works, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension. Finally, it tells the story of the early church after Jesus had returned to heaven, and how we are to live until Jesus comes again.

The Bible Reveals God

The God-inspired record of this history (the Bible) is the only infallible and authoritative book communicating and presenting God himself (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:21). To be sure, God is active everywhere in the world today, and we experience his precious power wherever we trust him and do his will. But we will go astray if we make this daily experience of God the basis of our communion with him. We know God for who he is, and meet him as he is, when we meet him through his Word—the Bible. We see this principle at work, for example, in 1 Samuel 3:21: "The LORD revealed *himself* to Samuel at Shiloh by the *word* of the LORD." The Lord *himself* is revealed by his *word*, that is, by what he *says* to us, whether audibly or in written form.

Therefore, when we seek to enjoy communion with the Lord—and not to be led astray by the ambiguities of religious experience—we read the Bible. From Genesis to

Revelation, God's words and God's deeds reveal God himself for our knowledge and our enjoyment. Of course, it is possible to read the Bible without enjoying communion with God. We must seek to understand the Bible's meaning, and we must pause to contemplate what we understand and, by the Spirit, to feel and express the appropriate response of the heart.

God communicates with us in many ways through the Bible and seeks the response of our communion with him. If God indicts us (2 Cor. 7:8–10), we respond to him with sorrow and repentance. If he commends us (Ps. 18:19–20), we respond to him with humble gratitude and joy. If he commands us to do something (Matt. 28:19–20), we look to him for strength and resolve to obey with his help. If he makes a promise (Heb. 13:5–6), we marvel at his grace and trust him to do what he says. If he warns us of some danger (Luke 21:34), we take him seriously and watch with a thankful sense of his presence and protection. If he describes something about himself (Isa. 46:9–11), his Son (Mark 1:11), or his Holy Spirit (John 16:13–14), we affirm it and admire it and pray for clearer eyes to see and enjoy his greatness and beauty.

Fellowship with the Triune God

In all these communications, it is God himself that we most want to see. Communion with God is not merely *learning about* God but enjoying *fellowship with* God in the truth he reveals about himself. The apostle John, who enjoyed unusually close communion with Jesus while he was on the earth, said that he wrote his letters so that we might enjoy this fellowship: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). In other words, the Bible records the words and deeds of God so that by means of these we have fellowship—that is, communion—with God.

This fellowship is with each person in the Trinity: with the Father (1 John 1:3), with the Son (1 Cor. 1:9), and with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). This is possible because each person of the Godhead communicates with us in a way that corresponds to his unique role in creation, providence, and salvation. As the great Puritan John Owen wrote in his classic *Communion with God*, the Father communicates himself to us by the way of "original authority," the Son from a "purchased treasury," and the Spirit by an "immediate efficacy." Each person, as Owen says, communicates with us "distinctly" in the sense that we may discern from which person particular realizations of the grace of God come to us. But "distinctly" does not mean "separately": particular fellowship with each person of the Trinity is always one facet of ongoing communion with all three.

Humble, Bold Prayer

Finally, from this Father-initiated, Son-purchased, Spirit-effected communion with God, we *pray* with humble boldness (Heb. 4:16). That is, we speak to God the Father, on the basis of Christ's work, by the help of the Spirit. This speaking is called *prayer*. It includes our confessions of sin (1 John 1:9), our praises of God's perfections (Ps. 96:4), our thanks for God's gifts (Ps. 118:21), and our requests that he would help us (Ps. 38:22) and others (Rom. 15:30–31)—all to the glory of God (Ps. 50:15), for the hallowing of his name, which must ever be our goal.

Prayer is the verbal aspect of our response to God in

communion with him. The Bible does speak of “groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26), but ordinarily prayer is the response of our heart to God in words. It may be in private (Matt. 6:6) or in public (1 Cor. 14:16). It may last all night (Luke 6:12) or be summed up in a moment’s cry (Matt. 14:30). It may be desperate (Jonah 2:2) or joyful (Ps. 119:162). It may be full of faith (Mark 11:24) or wavering with uncertainty (Mark 9:24).

But it is not optional. It is commanded—which is good news, because it means that God loves being the giver of omnipotent help (Ps. 50:15). The Bible reminds us that ordinary people can accomplish great things by prayer (James 5:17–18). It tells us about great answers to prayer (Isa. 37:21, 36). It gives us great examples of how to pray (Matt. 6:9–13; Eph. 3:14–19). And it offers amazing encouragements to pray (Matt. 7:7–11).

God Gets the Glory; We Get the Joy

The Bible shows that prayer is near the heart of why God created the world. When we pray for God to do what

only he can do, he alone gets the glory while we get the joy. We see this when Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, *that the Father may be glorified in the Son*” (John 14:13), and then later says, “Ask, and you will receive, *that your joy may be full*” (John 16:24). In prayer, God gets the *glory* and we get the *joy*. God is the overflowing fountain; we are satisfied with the living water. He is infinitely rich; we are the happy heirs.

Central to all our praying, as we have seen, must be our longing that God’s name be hallowed in the world—known and honored and loved (Matt. 6:9). To that end, we pray (1) for his church to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness . . . to the glory and praise of God” (Phil. 1:11); (2) that the gospel would spread and awaken faith in Jesus among all the nations (2 Thess. 3:1); and (3) that many who do not believe would be saved (Rom. 10:1). In this way, the aim of God’s Word and the aim of prayer become the same: the glory of God and the salvation of the nations through Jesus Christ. ◀

Reading the Bible for Personal Application

It is a marvel how personally the Bible applies. The words pointedly address the concerns of long-ago people in faraway places, facing specific problems, many of which no longer exist. They had no difficulty seeing the application. Much of what they read *was* personal application to actual situations they were facing. But nothing in the Bible was written directly to you or specifically about what you face. We are reading someone else’s mail. Yet the Bible repeatedly affirms that these words are also written for us: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4; cf. Deut. 29:29; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:15–17). Application today discovers ways in which the Spirit reapplies Scripture in a timely fashion.

Furthermore, the Bible is primarily about God, not you. The essential subject matter is the triune Redeemer Lord, culminating in Jesus Christ. When Jesus “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45), he showed how everything written—creation, promises, commands, history, sacrificial system, psalms, proverbs—reveals him. We are reading someone else’s biography. Yet that very story demonstrates how he includes us within his story. Jesus *is* the Word of God applied, all-wisdom embodied. As his disciples, we learn to similarly apply the Bible, growing up into his image. Application today experiences how the Spirit “rescripts” our lives by teaching us who God is and what he is doing.

“Personal application” proves wise when you reckon with these marvels. The Bible was written to others—but speaks to you. The Bible is about God—but draws you in. Your challenge is always to *reapply* Scripture afresh, because God’s purpose is always to *rescript* your life. How can you expand your wisdom in personal application? The following four ways are suggested.

1. Consolidate What You Have Already Learned

Assuming that you have listened well to some parts of the Bible, consider these personal questions. What chunk of Scripture has made the most difference in your life? What verse or passage have you turned to most frequently? What

makes these exact words frequently and immediately relevant? Your answer will likely embody four foundational truths about how to read the Bible for wise application.

First, this passage becomes your own because you listen. You remember what God says. He is saying this to you. You need these words. This promise, revelation, or command *must* be true. You *must* act on this call to faith and love. When you forget, you drift, stray, and flounder. When you remember and put it to work, bright truth rearranges your life. The foundation of application is always attentive listening to what God says.

Second, the passage and your life become fused. It is not simply a passage in the Bible. A specific word from God connects to some pointed struggle inside you and around you. These inner and outer troubles express your experience of the dual evil that plagues every human heart: sin and confusion from within; trouble and beguilement from without (1 Kings 8:37–39; Eccles. 9:3). But something God says invades your darkness with his light. He meets your actual need with his actual mercies. Your life and God’s words meet. Application depends on honesty about where you need help. Your kind of trouble is everywhere in the Bible.

Third, your appropriation of this passage reveals how God himself does the applying. He meets you before you meet him. The passage arrested you. God arranged your struggle with sin and suffering so that you would need this exact help. Without God’s initiative (“I will write it on their hearts,” Jer. 31:33) you would never make the connection. The Spirit chose to rewrite your inner script, pouring God’s love into your heart, inviting you to live in a new reality. He awakens your sense of need, gives you ears to hear, and freely gives necessary wisdom. Application is a gift, because wisdom is a gift.

Fourth, the application of beloved passages is usually quite straightforward. God states something in general terms. You insert your relevant particulars. For example:

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Ps. 23:4). What troubles are you facing? Who is with you?

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). What is your particular way of straying? How does the Lamb of God connect with your situation?

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). With what are you obsessed? What promises anchor your plea for help (Phil. 4:5, 7–9)?

Such words speak to common human experiences. A passage becomes personal when your details participate in what is said. The gap across centuries and between cultures seems almost to disappear. Your God is a very present help in trouble—this trouble. Application occurs in specifics.

2. Look for the Directly Applicable Passages

How do you widen your scope of application? Keep your eye out for *straightforward passages*. Typically they generalize or summarize in some manner, inviting personal appropriation. Consider the core promises of God, the joys and sorrows of many psalms, the moral divide in many proverbs, the call of many commands, the summary comment that interprets a story. As examples of the first, Exodus 34:6–7; Numbers 6:24–26; and Deuteronomy 31:6 state foundational promises that are repeatedly and variously applied throughout the rest of Scripture. Pay attention to how subsequent scriptures specifically reapply these statements, and to how the entire Bible illustrates them. Make such promises part of your repertoire of well-pondered truth. They are important for a reason. Get a feel for how these words come to a point in Jesus Christ and can rescript every life, including yours.

Consider how *generalization* occurs. In narratives, details make the story come to life. But psalms and proverbs adopt the opposite strategy. They intentionally flatten out specific references, so anyone can identify. David was troubled when he wrote Psalm 25—his emotions are clearly felt. But he left his own story at the door: “For your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great. . . . Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins” (Ps. 25:11, 18). He gives no details. We are given a template flexible enough to embrace any one of us. As you reapply, *your* sins and sufferings make Psalm 25 come to life as it leads you to mercy.

In matters of obedience, the Bible often proclaims a general truth without mentioning any of the multitude of possible applications. When Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and money” (Luke 16:13), he leaves you to puzzle out the forms of money-worship particular to your personality and your culture. In such cases, the Bible speaks in large categories, addressing many different experiences, circumstances, and actions. Sorting out what it specifically means is far from being mechanical and automatic, but the application process follows a rather direct line.

If you have a favorite Bible passage, it is likely one of these parts of Scripture whose application is relatively direct. But our experience of immediate relevance can

skew our expectations for how the rest of God’s revelation applies to our lives.

3. Recognize the Sorts of Passages where Personal Application Is Less Direct

Here is the core dilemma. Most of the Bible does *not* speak directly and personally to you. How do you “apply” the stories in Genesis? What about genealogies and census data? Leviticus? The life stories of Esther, Job, Samson, or Paul? The distribution of land and villages in Joshua? The history of Israel’s decline detailed through 1 and 2 Kings? The prophetic woes scorching Moab, Philistia, Egypt, and Babylon, fulfilled so long ago? The ruminations of Ecclesiastes? The Gospel stories showing Jesus in action? The New Testament’s frequent preoccupation with Jew–Gentile relations? The apocalyptic images in the Revelation?

The Bible’s stories, histories, and prophecies—even many of the commands, teachings, promises, and prayers—take thoughtful work in order to reapply with current relevance. If you receive them directly—as if they speak directly to you, about you, with your issues in view—you will misunderstand and misapply Scripture. For example, the angel’s command to Joseph, “take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt” (Matt. 2:13), is not a command to anyone today to buy a ticket to Egypt! Those who attempt to take the entire Bible as if it directly applies today end up distorting the Bible. It becomes an omni-relevant magic book teeming with private messages and meanings. God does not intend that his words function that way.

These passages *do* apply. But most of the Bible applies differently from the passages tilted toward immediate relevance. What you read applies by extension and analogy, not directly. Less sizzle, but quietly significant. In one sense, such passages apply exactly because they are *not* about you. Understood rightly, such passages give a changed perspective. They locate you on a bigger stage. They teach you to notice God and other people in their own right. They call you to understand yourself within a story—many stories—bigger than your personal history and immediate concerns. They locate you within a community far wider than your immediate network of relationships. And they remind you that you are always in God’s presence, under his eye, and part of his program.

4. Tackle the Application of Less-direct Passages

Application is a lifelong process, seeking to expand and deepen wisdom. At the simplest level, simply read through the Bible in its larger chunks. The cumulative acquisition of wisdom is hard to quantify. A sense of what truth means and how truth works is overheard as well as heard. But also wrestle to work out the implications of specific passages.

Consider two examples. The first presents an extreme challenge to personal application: a genealogy or census. These are directly *irrelevant* to your life. Your name is not on the list. The reasons for the list disappeared long ago. You gain nothing by knowing that “Koz fathered Anub, Zobebah, and the clans of Aharhel” (1 Chron. 4:8). But when you learn to listen rightly, such lists intend many good things—and each list has a somewhat different purpose. Among the things taught are these:

- The Lord writes down names in his book of life.
- Families and communities matter to him.

- God is faithful to his promises through long history.
- He enlists his people as troops in the redemptive reconquest of a world gone bad.+
- All the promises of God find their “Yes” in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20).

You “apply” a list of ancient names and numbers by extension, not directly. Your love for God grows surer and more intelligent when you ponder the *kind* of thing this is, rather than getting lost in the blizzard of names or numbers.

The second example presents a mid-level challenge. Psalms are often among the most directly relevant parts of Scripture. But what do you do when Psalm 21:1 says, “O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices”? The psalm is not talking about you, and it is not you talking—not directly. A train of connected truths apply this psalm to you, leading you out of yourself.

First, David lived and wrote these words, but Jesus Christ most fully lived—is now living, and will finally fulfill—this entire psalm. He is the greatest human king singing this song of deliverance; and he is also the divine Lord whose power delivers. We know from the perspective of NT fulfillment that this psalm is overtly by and about Jesus, not about any particular individual.

Second, you participate in the triumph of your King. You are caught up in all that the psalm describes, because you are in this Christ. So pay attention to *his* experience, because he includes you.

Third, your participation arises not as a solo individual but in company with countless brothers and sisters. You most directly apply this psalm by joining with fellow believers in a chorus of heartfelt gladness: “O LORD, *we* will sing and praise your power” (Ps. 21:13). The king’s opening joy in God’s power has become his people’s closing joy.

Finally, figuratively, you are also kingly in Christ. In this sense, Jesus’ experience of deliverance (the entire psalm) does apply to your life. Having walked through the psalm as an expression of the exultant triumph of Christ Jesus himself, you may now make it your experience too. You could even adapt Psalm 21 into the first person, inserting “I/me/my” in place of “the king” and “he/him/his.” It would be blasphemous to do that at first. It is fully proper and your exceeding joy to do this in the end. This is a song in which all heaven will join. As you grasp that your brothers and sisters share this same goal, you will love them and serve their joy more consistently.

God reveals himself and his purposes throughout Scripture. Wise application always starts there.

Conclusion

You started by identifying one passage that speaks persistently, directly, and relevantly into your life. You have seen how both the direct and the indirect passages intend to change you. Learning to wisely apply the harder, less relevant passages has a surprising benefit. Your whole Bible “applies personally.” This Lord is your God; this history is your history; these people are your people; this Savior has brought you in to participate in who he is and what he does. Venture out into the remotest regions of Scripture, seeking to know and love your God better.

Hopefully, you better understand why your most reliable passage so changed your life. Ponder those familiar words once more. You will notice that they also lift you out of self-preoccupation, out of the double evil of sin and misery. God brought his gracious care to you through that passage, and rearranged your life. You love him who first loved you, so you love his other children. And that is how the whole Bible, and each of its parts, applies personally. ◀

Reading the Bible for Preaching and Public Worship

The Bible, as holy Scripture, is the only certain source of God’s words in the entire world. Paul’s statement that “All Scripture is breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16; see note) means that all the words of the Bible are God’s words to us. Therefore if we want to hear our Creator and Lord speaking to us, we must continually give attention to the authoritative words of the Bible. This means that the Bible must be the only true foundation and constant guide for all that we do in the life of the church, and the Bible must be central to all that happens in preaching and public worship.

Moses and Jesus confirm how God’s people are to regard his holy Word. On the very day that Moses completed the writing of the Book of the Law, he directed that it be placed beside the ark (Deut. 31:26), sang his final song (the great Song of Moses; Deut. 31:30–32:43), and then declared that “it is no empty word for you, but your very life” (Deut. 32:47). Moses’ declaration set the standard for the primacy and sufficiency of God’s Word (cf. Psalms 19; 119). A millennium and a half later Jesus, the second Moses, after defeating Satan with three deft quotations from Deuteronomy, declared, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). The Scriptures were life to Moses and food to Jesus; as such they together establish the ideal for God’s people and directly

inform the Bible’s use in preaching and public worship. Jesus’ dependence on the sufficiency and potency of God’s Word raised the standard high for all apostolic and post-apostolic preaching and worship.

The Bible’s Use in Preaching

When the apostle Paul instructs his younger colleague Timothy in the conduct of public worship, he places the Bible at its very center: “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. . . . Practice these things, immerse yourself in them” (1 Tim. 4:13, 15). Paul’s direction was: read the Word; preach the Word! (Cf. 2 Tim. 4:2.) The early church sought to follow Paul’s exhortation. Justin Martyr, writing c. A.D. 150–155, describes a typical Lord’s Day: “On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has finished, the president speaks, instructing and exhorting the people to imitate these good things” (*First Apology* 1.67). In other words, the practice of these earliest churches was that the Scripture was to be read, and then preaching was to be based on that reading of the Word.

From the text. Paul directs Timothy, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). “Rightly handling” is a compound word in Greek, in which the first part comes from the Greek word *orthos*—“straight.” The exact charge to Timothy is to impart the word of truth *without deviation* and *without dilution*—to get it straight and give it straight! The preacher must preach the text, not the idea that brought him to the text. He must stand behind the Bible, not in front of it. He must preach what the passage says, not what he wants it to say.

Good preaching requires prayerfully interpreting the text in its context. This involves using the established rules of interpretation; understanding the text’s application both in its historical setting and in the whole of Scripture; discerning how it is a revelation of Jesus Christ and making the appropriate biblical connections; taking the trip from Jerusalem to one’s own town and coming to see its present relevance; articulating the theme of the text; using stories and illustrations which truly illuminate the text; and employing language that actually communicates in today’s culture.

From the heart. However, the proper use of the Bible in preaching requires more than good hermeneutics and homiletics; it also requires a heart that has been softened and prepared and sanctified by the Word that is to be preached. The Puritan William Ames (1576–1633) expressed it well:

Next to the evidence of truth, and the will of God drawn out of the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward affection of the heart without any affectation. To this purpose it is very profitable, if besides the daily practice of piety we use serious meditation and fervent prayer to work those things upon our own hearts, which we would persuade others of.

Every appropriation of the truth preached will strengthen the preacher for preaching. Every act of repentance occasioned in his soul by the Word he now preaches will give conviction to his voice.

Jonathan Edwards’s *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (1746) has provided the best explanation of what must take place within the preacher. By “affections” Edwards meant one’s *heart*, one’s *inclinations*, and one’s *will*. As Edwards said, “true religion consists in a great measure in vigorous and lively actings and the inclination and will of the soul, or the fervent exercises of the heart.” Edwards demonstrates from a cascade of Scriptures that real Christianity so impacts the affections that it shapes one’s fears, hopes, loves, hatreds, desires, joys, sorrows, gratitudes, compassions, and zeals.

This is what should routinely happen to the preacher: the message should work its way through his whole intellectual and moral being as he prepares for and practices the proclamation of God’s Word. When the message has affected him deeply, then he is ready to preach. Sermon preparation is twenty hours of prayer. It is humble, holy, critical thinking. It is repeatedly asking the Holy Spirit for insight. It is the word penetrating into the depths of the preacher’s own soul. It is ongoing repentance. It is utter dependence. It is a singing heart.

The Bible’s Use in Public Worship

God’s Word deserves great reverence from his people. Isaiah writes, “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2). Therefore when Scripture is read aloud in a worship service, the reader and the congregation should take care to convey the reverent attention that Scripture deserves.

From its earliest days the church gave primacy to the reading of Holy Scripture, as seen in the apostle Paul’s aforementioned charge to Timothy to devote himself to “the public reading of Scripture,” as well as Justin Martyr’s account of the apostolic church’s practice of reading “the memoirs of the apostles and writings of the prophets . . . as long as time permits.” The regular custom soon was to have two extended public readings, one from the OT and one from the NT.

Reading of Scripture. Every Bible-believing church must give preeminence to Scripture in its public services of worship. This means that the Scripture to be expounded should be read aloud, and should be set forth in its full context. After all, the reading of God’s Word is the one place where we can be sure that we are hearing God. Responsive readings can be beneficial because they involve the congregation in voicing the sacred text.

There is substantial wisdom in keeping to the apostolic church’s custom of reading passages from the OT and NT in pairs, as it were, because this practice weekly reaffirms the continuity of the two Testaments, encourages biblical theology, and counters the tendencies of many today to pit the two Testaments against each other. It also substantially contributes to the service as a service of the Word in its unity and fullness.

Congregational response to the reading with a hearty “Amen!” or the time-honored “Thanks be to God” can further elevate the corporate assent to the centrality and authority of God’s Word. Jerome said of the congregational “Amen” in his day that at times it “seemed like a crack of thunder.” How glorious and how good for the soul!

Of course, such attention to God’s Word can also prove ineffective if the reading itself is left to a last-minute assignment, such that the reader fails to prepare mentally and spiritually for what he or she is required to do. All of us have heard the Scripture abused by a reader who hasn’t the faintest idea of the meaning of what he is reading, or by reading too fast, or mispronouncing common words, or by losing his place. This is not to suggest that the Scripture is to be read as dramatically as possible or performed as a reader’s theater. But how God-honoring it is to read God’s Word well, with a prayerful spirit. Pastors and readers can serve their congregations well by prayerfully reading the text a dozen times with pencil in hand *before* reading it to God’s people.

A service of the Word. The Bible’s use in preaching and public worship should be in such a way as to result in a Christ-exalting service of the Word. This requires work by the preacher and the leaders of the congregation, so that God’s Word is read to his glory, the sermon is derived from the faithful exposition of the text reading, and the reading and preaching of the biblical passage is set in the context of songs and hymns and programs that are redolent with the substance of God’s holy Word. ◀

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