

APPROACHING FORMATIVE SCRIPTURE READING WITH BOTH HEAD AND HEART



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Abstract. Scripture continues to play a very important role in my formative walk with God, yet keeping both “head” and “heart” in my Scripture reading and study has been a challenge. Two helpful insights for me involved, first, identifying two distinct but complimentary approaches to Scripture—analytical reading and meditative reading—and, second, intentionally welcoming both approaches as I read and study Scripture. In this reflective essay I describe aspects of my journey and engagement with Scripture, clarifying my understanding of these two approaches to Scripture, and sharing some of the fruit both approaches have yielded for me—including a meditative poem from an episode in Jesus’s ministry.

During college I read and studied the Bible with youthful zeal, connecting with God in a personal way. It nourished my involvement as a student volunteer with a parachurch ministry on campus. Then in seminary, I learned a more structured approach to studying God’s Word. I became acquainted with Hebrew and Greek and various procedures to hone my analytical study of the Bible, through which I grew in my knowledge of God and his plan. Following seminary, I served as a pastoral staff member and now for many years as a seminary professor. Over these years I continued to develop such methodical skills, for my personal study and teaching ministry. Yet I found that something was lacking in my approach to the Bible. I had lost much of that personal connection with God evident during college days. Must we accept that loss of this personal aspect of studying God’s Word as a normal part of growing up in Christianity? I used to think so.

Then about fourteen years ago, God awakened me to something more, touching my heart through his Word like never before in a remote cabin on a three-week spiritual retreat of “guided” solitude. I met with a mentor for sixty minutes each day and the remaining hours were spent alone with God—praying, reading Scripture, and journaling. God’s Word pierced my heart in a deeply emotional experience that launched a new-to-me formation journey inward. To be honest, it turned out to be a divine watershed encounter. On Monday of the third week, I asked the Lord for direction and

was prompted to look at the book of Romans. I knelt at my bed and began reading Romans 1. When I got to verses 30 and 31 the words on the page jumped out at me: "arrogant," "boastful," "unloving," "unmerciful." They became "living and active" words of conviction, prying open my heart, uncovering that layer of sinfulness hidden from me, a layer of pride I could not sense at all, but others did. It is embarrassing to note that these descriptors from Romans 1 were part of a list of pagan vices.

God was tenderly yet forcefully making me aware of my sinfulness in the presence of his own holiness. Since coming to Christ at a young age, I had never genuinely sensed my sinfulness before God. As I continued reading Romans on that Monday morning, the words persistently penetrated my heart with such force that for two hours I cried in the presence of God who loved me enough to make me aware, at a deep experiential level, of my own pride and sinfulness, and my need for his mercy and his continuing work in my life as his child. Although having served God as a pastor, and now a seminary professor, I was not exempt from this vile sin of pride. Some have blocked arteries; I had (have) clogged spiritual veins. The cholesterol of self-righteousness minimized (and still minimizes) the work God could do through me.

This watershed encounter has prompted further biblical study to understand my experience for, as theologians Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest note, "The motivation for painstaking theological research often comes from enigmatic and even traumatic experiences in life."¹ Over the years I have continued journeying inward. Since God has used Scripture as a key prompter for my formation change, let me share what I am learning about how to approach God's Word. I am becoming more accustomed to bringing head and heart into both the academic study of Scripture and the devotional meditation of Scripture. Some illustrations are included to stimulate further innovation by others.

Though God works in various ways, it is clear that God's Word is an essential means in the formation process, as noted in Jesus's high priestly prayer: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17; cf. John 8:31-32). D. A. Carson explains,

The Father will immerse Jesus' followers in the revelation of himself in his Son; he will sanctify them by sending the Paraclete to guide them into all truth (15:13) . . . In practical terms, no-one can be "sanctified" or set apart for the Lord's use ["In John's Gospel, such 'sanctification' is always for mission."] without learning to think God's thoughts after him, without learning to live in conformity with the "word" he has graciously given.²

¹ Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 38.

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According To John*, Pillar NTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 566.

Is there a way for us to become more open to God's transforming work as we read, study, and meditate on Scripture? In his classic book on prayer, Andrew Murray notes,

This hearing the voice of God is something more than the thoughtful study of the Word. One can study and gain knowledge of the Word having little real fellowship with the living God. But there is also a reading of the Word, in the very presence of the Father and under the leading of the Spirit, in which the Word comes to us in living power from God Himself. It is to us the very voice of the Father, a real, personal fellowship with Himself. The living voice of God enters the heart, bringing blessing and strength, and awakening the response of a living faith that reaches back to the heart of God.³

ANALYTICAL AND MEDITATIVE READING OF SCRIPTURE

It has been helpful for me to recognize two complementary approaches when we come to Scripture—one I call *analytical* Scripture reading and the other *meditative* Scripture reading. To take Andrew Murray's comment to heart, I think it is good that believers engage regularly in both. The *analytical* mode for the reading and study of Scripture is highly honored in the scholarly evangelical tradition. The words "Bible study," "exegesis," and "hermeneutics" are associated with this approach in which we bring questions to the text and analyze it in order to gain knowledge of the truth. Analytical reading highlights the use of our God-given mind to master the public meaning of the God-given written text, an essential process to discern the objective truth of God's special revelation. We wrestle with the written to winnow out the author's intended meaning resident in the text to know the truth. We are on a mission to ply the text with questions until we discern the answers.

Yet *meditative* Scripture reading also offers a rich opportunity to visit with God. Such reading is of a different tone and texture and adds another dimension to how the Bible can impact our lives. Here we patiently wait and listen for God to speak to us, personally. Our purpose is not to master a certain portion of Scripture, but to read a few verses, slowly, meditatively, vocalizing each word, and monitoring our heart to sense God's movement to highlight a certain word, or phrase or sentence for our attentive reflection and rumination. In meditative reading, there is no hurry to read so many verses, to pose questions of the text, no need to control or direct our reading. We wish to be ready for God to speak to us personally. With David we invite God to expose the depth of our soul, "Search me O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any

³ Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (New Kensington, PA: Whittaker, House, 1981/1887), 164.

offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139: 23–24). And with the child Samuel we open ourselves to God with submission, "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:10).

If the one mode could be categorized as "exploring" and "researching," the other might best be viewed as "listening" and "hearing." These two modes—analytical and meditative Scripture reading—involve, I believe, a symbiotic relationship and are so distinctly different that they may seem almost mutually exclusive. As Peter Toon notes, "The separation of the *scholarly* pursuit from the *devotional* use of the Bible is not inevitable, but it is common."⁴ I am encouraged to see that evangelicals have begun to recognize the need for both approaches, yet the question is how do these approaches relate to each other?

For me, it is difficult to practice both simultaneously if I desire to be true to the dictates of each format. I prefer to engage them in a *cyclical* process, now employing an analytical mode, now pausing to engage the meditative mode, then again employing an analytical mode, and pausing again to engage the meditative mode, and so on. On most occasions when I have my "questioning/research cap" on, I find I am in charge and am not as ready to receive and listen. So I consciously decide to stop the questioning mode and enter a time of meditation. Yet, on a few occasions I give myself permission to pursue a question and then return to meditation. Through such repetitive movement I seek to understand truth and to welcome God's penetrating and personal touch of my life. We need both analytical and meditative approaches to Scripture if we wish to be fully responsive to God's transforming work in our lives through his Word.

GOD WORKS IN US AND WE WORK AS WELL

The effective application of Scripture involves both divine and human activity. God is the prime mover, initiating and sustaining the sanctification process (1 Cor. 6:11, 2 Cor. 3:18, Gal. 5:22–23, 1 Thess. 3:12–13, 5:23, Heb. 12:5–11; Titus 3:5).⁵ Yet we also have an important role, as Grudem notes, "God works in our sanctification and we work as well, and we work for the same purpose."⁶ Clarifying our part of the process may help set a

⁴ Peter Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 73.

⁵ Also, Satanic activity and the evil effects of society are factors that affect and hinder our application of Scripture.

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 753. Or as J. I. Packer explains, "Sanctification, however, is in one sense synergistic—it is an ongoing cooperative process in which regenerate persons, alive to God and freed from sin's dominion (Rom. 6:11, 14–18), are required to exert themselves in sustained obedience. God's method of sanctification is neither activism (self-reliant activity) nor apathy (God-reliant passivity), but God-dependent effort (2 Cor. 7:1; Phil. 3:10–14; Heb. 12:14)," *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1993), 170–171.

broader context for discussion of Scripture application. At least three distinct *conscious* human movements can be discerned in Scripture regarding how we may cooperate with God's transforming work in us:

- (a) Conscious awareness of a problem or area of lack,⁷
- (b) Intentionality and effort expended to address this problem or lack, and
- (c) Conscious awareness that God is also working to sustain our good efforts.

That our conscious awareness and intelligent engagement is needed is indicated in Psalm 32:8–9 in which a contrast is proposed between guiding a person with the mind and physically leading an animal: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle.” Derek Kidner explains, “This vivid picture brings out, by its contrasts, the emphasis in verse 8 on *intelligent co-operation*, which God has set His heart on eliciting from us (cf. John 15:15); for whatever else one can do with a horse one can hardly *counsel* it (8), or control it without bringing pressure on it.”⁸ Jesus's illustration in the Sermon on the Mount clarifies that conscious awareness precedes deliberate action. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23–24). Once we are aware, we can specifically respond appropriately to the counsel of God.

In addition, any response requires intentionality on our part, a thoughtful decision or plan to do something about what we are now aware. Jesus clarifies, “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye” (Matt. 7:5). Finally, throughout this deliberative process, we must also be consciously aware that God is working in our good efforts—we intentionally leave room in our plans and actions for God to work. For example, in the Old Testament when Israel was at war, Jonathan and his armor bearer stepped out in faith to engage a company of Philistines in battle. “Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few” (1 Sam. 14:6). Due to Jonathan's initiative,

⁷ For some suggestions about becoming aware of areas of lack, see my “Wake Up to Five Formation Gaps,” in *Living Into the Life of Jesus: The Formation of Christian Character* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012).

⁸ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 135, emphasis added. Klaus Bockmuehl affirms this contrast, based on his study of the Book of Acts, “[God] guides, not as we might guide a child by the hand or a horse by the reins, but through the instructions he speaks—instructions that we hear and then act upon,” *Listening to the God who Speaks* (Colorado Springs: Herder & Herder, 1990), 83.

with God's help, these two routed twenty soldiers and subsequently God brought a panic on the whole Philistine army (vs 15). "The Philistines [were] in total confusion, striking each other with their swords" (vs 20). For his ministry, Paul explains his own dependence on God, "To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (Col. 1:29).

Yet, at other times, our response may mean doing nothing about the situation but waiting for God's timing and solution (cf. Phil. 4:6-7). For example, King Saul did not follow the prophet Samuel's directions to delay offering sacrifices until Samuel arrived. Rather, King Saul was more anxious about the approaching enemy than entrusting himself to God's provision. Sadly, for this pattern of disobedience God removed the kingdom from Saul's heirs (1 Sam. 13:5-14). Contrast the differing mindsets of King Saul and his son Jonathan while acting. Saul was anxious and fearful about the enemy (1 Sam. 13:11-12), yet Jonathan was explicitly *conscious* that he was leaving room for God to work (1 Sam. 14:6). Whether we wait or act, it must be with an awareness of dependence on divine resources, which brings us back full circle to the first point, God is always working in us.

ANALYTICAL READING: MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

Regarding the analytical approach, I think it is helpful to keep in mind E. D. Hirsh's general distinction between *meaning* and *significance*.

Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.⁹

We wrestle with the text, what the human and divine authors have left for us, to discern its *meaning* as it was originally understood by the hearers of that day. J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hayes propose a simple four-step model for moving from Bible interpretation to application.

Step 1: Grasp the text in their town. What did the text mean to the original audience?

Step 2: Measure the width of the river to cross. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

⁹ E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1967), 8.

Step 3: Cross the principlizing bridge. What is the theological principle in this text?¹⁰

Step 4: Grasp the text in our town. How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle in their lives?¹¹

Then the *significance* of the text relates to the implications of the passage to a particular situation of the contemporary reader. As William Klein, Craig Blomberg and Robert Hubbard explain, “The meaning of any given passage of Scripture remains consistent no matter who is reading the text, while its significance may vary from reader to reader.”¹² So, we study the passage following certain interpretative procedures to discern the author’s intended meaning and purpose, and how the readers received the text, and then attempt to respond to the message God today for Christian formation and living.

MEDITATIVE READING: A PERSONAL MOMENT WITH GOD

In the meditative approach to Scripture, we place ourselves in a context of openness to the mystery of God, with no real agenda, as he seeks to touch our lives in the deep places. For, if we wish to seek a personal word from God, nowhere else can we be as certain of hearing God’s voice as when we are listening to the very words of God in Scripture. This opportunity is possible because the Bible is the *Word of God*, not a Word detached

¹⁰ There is a growing concern about a “principlizing approach” to Bible application, although it is the traditional favorite. For recent discussions of alternative ways, see Gary T. Meadows, ed., *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), presenting four approaches to responding to Scripture: Walter C. Kaiser’s “A Principlizing Model,” Daniel M. Doriani’s “A Redemptive-Historical Model,” Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s “A Drama-of-Redemption Model,” and William J. Webb’s “A Redemptive-Movement Model.”; J. Todd Billings, “How to Read the Bible,” *Christianity Today* (October 2011), 25–30, summarizes insights from the “theological interpretation of Scripture movement” which attempts to reunite “discipleship and critical study of the Bible” (27), Vanhoozer is cited favorably; also see Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1996), 208–209. In the Meadows volume cited above, responder Mark Strauss asks, “Should establishing ‘principles’ really be the goal of interpretation? The Christian life is not about asserting rules or principles, but about enacting God’s Word in real life” (275).

¹¹ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God’s Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 25. A helpful guide for locating reference tools, see John Glynn, *Commentary and Reference Survey: A Comprehensive Guide to Biblical and Theological Resources*, 10th ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007).

¹² William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 406.

from God. We come to Scripture as a conversation *with* God. Scripture must always be studied within the context of a dynamic and growing relationship with *the God who is personal*.

In the past I tended to miss this crucial *personal* dimensional, and so did Dan Wallace. When Wallace's son contracted a rare disease from which he almost died, their family was thrown into a whirlwind of medical procedures—a "summer from hell." Although an accomplished New Testament professor, Wallace was confronted with the need to sense God's presence more than ever before.

Through this experience I found that the Bible was not adequate. I needed God in a personal way—not as an object of my study, but as friend, guide, comforter. I needed an existential experience of the Holy One. Quite frankly, I found that the Bible was not the answer . . . I found a longing to get closer to God, but found myself unable to do so through my normal means: exegesis, Scripture reading, more exegesis. I believe that I depersonalized God so much that when I really needed him I did not know how to relate. I longed for him . . . I found a suffocation of the Spirit in my evangelical tradition as well as in my own heart.¹³

The problem is not with the Bible, but our approach. Scripture must always be studied within the context of a dynamic and growing relationship with *the God who is personal*.

Both a *textual* focus and a *relational/personal* focus are necessary in our engagement with the Scriptures. Notice the connection between Hebrews 4:12 and 13:

[12] For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. [13] And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.¹⁴

William Lane explains, "In context, the force of v 13 is to assert that exposure to the word of Scripture entails exposure to God himself."¹⁵ Gerhard Maier highlights this personal element, "The Bible is far more than a treasure trove of doctrinal truths. To view it [only] as a catalog of God's utterances would be to mistake its character. It is primarily communication of

¹³ Daniel Wallace, "Whose afraid of the Holy Spirit?," *Christianity Today* (September 12, 1994), 37.

¹⁴ All Scripture NASV unless otherwise noted.

¹⁵ William Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, vol. 47a of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word, 1999), 103.

God—communication in the literal sense: God himself communes with us. He wants us to experience communion with him.”¹⁶ Furthermore, we are part of a larger community of saints, both living and now with God. The Word of God is given to the people of God. Both the interpretation of the Word and spiritual formation by the Word must be seen as part and parcel of participation within this larger Christian community.

As we come to God’s Word, we are not just studying recorded history; we are engaged in a personal communication and communion with God. Consider William Lane’s transparency about his own analytical study while he wrote his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, how the task of Scripture study for Lane was not simply an analytical exercise.

Only gradually did I come to understand that my primary task as a commentator was to listen to the text, and to the discussion it has prompted over the course of centuries, as a child who needed to be made wise. The responsibility to discern truth from error has been onerous at times. When a critical or theological decision has been demanded by the text before I was prepared to commit myself, I have adopted the practice of the Puritan commentators in laying the material before the Lord and asking for his guidance. This has made the preparation of the commentary a spiritual as well as an intellectual pilgrimage through the text of the Gospel. In learning to be sensitive to all that the evangelist was pleased to share with me I have been immeasurably enriched by the discipline of responsible listening.¹⁷

Along these lines, Pastor Jack Deere (and former Old Testament professor) concurs and warns against intellectual pride when we approach Scripture.

Most of the books on interpreting Scripture that I have read lead you to believe that the key to understanding the Bible lies in your mind. The best interpreters know the original languages and historical backgrounds of the Bible. They understand literary structure, systematic theology, and many other things . . . Scholarship can be a great blessing. Every time I use a concordance, a great biblical commentary, or a carefully thought-out theological monograph, I am benefitting from someone’s scholarship. What I am objecting to is the intellectual pride that is too frequently in biblical scholarship, and the pride that makes the mind the key element in our effort to draw close to God . . . The mind certainly has a role to play in this pursuit, but it is not the chief role.

According to the Bible, as far as human responsibility is concerned, the key to interpreting all forms of divine revelation is found in

¹⁶ Gerhard Meier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 55.

¹⁷ William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), xii.

the heart, not in the mind. The religious leaders of Jesus' day studied the Bible more than anyone, but because of the condition of their hearts they never heard God's voice at any time (see John 5:37) . . . Humility, not intelligence, has always been the heart quality that moves God to speak to us and enables us to hear him clearly. It is the humble, not the smart, that God guides and teaches (see Ps. 25:9).¹⁸

TRANSFORMING HEAD AND HEART

Only late in life have I come to appreciate the importance of emotions. They are windows to our soul, to our inner life. The so-called "train diagram" I learned many years ago communicates a helpful truth, but does so at great cost. "Fact" as the train engine leads the way; next comes the coal car of "Faith" and finally "Feelings" as the caboose follows. I downplayed the legitimate role of emotions. Yet Jesus himself experienced a wide range of emotions of which he was well aware. For example, in the garden he confided with Peter, James and John, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch" (Mark 14:34).

In formative Scripture reading, we make space for God to touch us in the depths of our emotional life, not just our intellectual life. A key passage that directed me to this important point was Philippians 4:6-7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Gerald Hawthorne notes that "this expression, 'the peace of God,' is found nowhere else in the NT . . . Paul seems here to be referring to the tranquility of God's own eternal being (Caird), the peace of God which God himself has (Barth), the calm serenity that characterizes his very nature . . . which grateful, trusting Christians are welcome to share."¹⁹

Furthermore, although the term "heart" [*kardia*] in characteristic Hebrew fashion usually designates the whole person, a narrower focus is intended in this passage, as Hawthorne explains.

But here, where Paul places *kardia* [heart] alongside *noema* [mind] grammatically in such a way as to distinguish the one from the other . . . *kardia* very likely has its meaning narrowed simply to that of designating the seat of one's emotions or deepest feelings, or simply to the emotions and feelings themselves . . . Together these words refer to the

¹⁸ Jack Deere, *The Beginner's Guide to the Gift of Prophecy* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publication, 2001), 89-90.

¹⁹ Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians*, vol. 43 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 184.

entire inner being of the Christian, his emotions, affections, thoughts and moral choices.²⁰

For much of my life, I was not able to receive the substantial promise of peace, since I was not aware of how anxious and needy I was.

As we walk with the Spirit, we are transformed to manifest “the fruit of the Spirit” love, joy, peace—*affections we experience* in the depths of our soul. In keeping with the promise of Philippians 4:6–7, I am sharing more of my anxious thoughts with God and, as a result, I am experiencing more of his peace in my life—much more peace than in past years. God uses his Word to transform our cognitions and our emotions.

APPLICATION OF SCRIPTURE WITH PARTICIPATORY MEDITATION

Within the meditative approach we follow no real method. We simply become open to moments when God himself *immediately* directs his Word suddenly to our attention. Sometimes the text seems to jump off the page and touch our hearts in a deep spot. Within this meditative approach, the key distinction is *how* the application arrives: we do not derive or devise the application from the passage; rather it is something that *comes to us*, from the text, directly from God the Spirit alone. The better we can sense the Spirit’s moving in our hearts, the better we can discern a true case of this divine movement rather than our own human machinations.²¹

Participatory Meditation is a means of the study and meditation of the Gospels in which readers can encounter Jesus in a personal way.²² When Jesus taught by parables, he expected his listeners to enter into the story and identify with the characters (e.g. Matt. 21:45). The Bible is more than a history book. It is God’s grand story that involves real people, living in a real world. How God interacted with people in the past, is how he can interact with us today—the very same God is acting through history. Jesus shows the way through his deep knowledge of Scripture that guided his life and

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 185.

²¹ For further discussion of the Spirit’s ministry of illumination and guidance see my book, “Communication: Hearing the God who Speaks,” in *Wasting Time With God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).

²² This participatory approach is adapted from the practice of Ignatian contemplation; for a helpful resource see Timothy Gallagher, OMV, *Meditation and Contemplation: An Ignatian Guide to Praying With Scripture* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing, 2008).

ministry (e.g., Mark 12:10, Luke 4:21, John 19:28). The study and meditation of God's Word is the preeminent source of divine guidance.²³

Of course our analytical reading and study of Scripture sets an important context to engage in meditative, prayerful reading of Scripture. Any personal touch of God will have some connection to the public meaning of the text, as Michael Casey notes.

In one sense there is not much point in spending time with the Scriptures if we are not diligent in searching out the authentic meaning of the text before us . . . It is true that there are passages in the Scriptures that speak to us with urgency and passion even without preparation on our part. It is also true that we often fumble and miss the meaning of a text simply because we have not taken the trouble to do the necessary spade work.²⁴

Our increasing knowledge of Scripture provides an important informational framework for meditative reading. After slowly reading the passage, I usually consult a good commentary or reference work to help me become aware of factors that may contribute to my deeper appreciation of the passage. Some examples are included in a later section. With this informational context, I can proceed with my meditation of the passage.

Thus, we can enter into the Gospel parable or actual events of Jesus's life and ministry and permit the Holy Spirit to bring the personal significance of a Gospel passage to each of us. The process involves studying the Gospel passage using the standard study skills as mentioned previously to understand the basic facts of the event, including its context and background. Then we transition to Participatory Meditation in which we take on one of the roles of the event or story and see with new eyes how Jesus ministers to them and by application/implication to us today, since "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8) and one who is now interceding to the Father on our behalf (Rom. 8:34). The final step is that we confirm the personal significance we have received from the passage with our kinship/home group and/or a mature Christian who knows us well.

The process of this kind of participatory meditation involves imagining we are there. We become one of the persons at the event (e.g., a disciple, a main character, a local observing the event). Then we read the Bible story

²³ New Testament scholar Charles Talbert suggests that Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, particularly his illustrations, can function as *verbal icons*. "Like the painted icon, the verbal icon provides a window into divine reality, making possible the perception of the spiritual world. In the Sermon on the Mount the words of Jesus function as verbal icons enabling Jesus's disciples to *see* into the divine reality of God's unconditional will. Character is shaped as the disciple comes to see differently." *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Ethical Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 72.

²⁴ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Ligouri, MO.: Ligouri/Triumph, 1995), 63-64.

over a few times and enter the story ourselves. As we read the episode and take on that particular role, we attend to how are we *experiencing* this event in that role. We try to include as many of our physical senses as we can: What do we see? hear? smell? taste? touch? Later we journal our thoughts, feelings, and reflections. Of course it includes a bit of holy imagination.

To illustrate how Scripture study can impact the heart, let me share a reflection I created. I was meditating on the episode where Jesus confronted the man from Gerasene in Galilee who was strongly oppressed by Legion, a host of demons (Mark 5:1–20, Matt. 8:28–34, Luke 8:26–39). I imagined myself as that demonized man himself, and the thoughts and feelings I might have. The purpose of participatory meditation is to get inside the biblical story so we can get inside our own story.

Crying Out for Mercy

What is it like to live normally again?
I'm just finding out.
My friends can tell you the story,
Bottom line, I was a mad man.

So crazy and violent, they chained me up.
But some super reflex in me tore chains apart
I wouldn't let anyone overpower me.
But I was in pain the whole time, crying out for mercy.

Then some stranger invaded my territory.
It was either him or me, so I rushed him,
Tried to use my powers to keep him away.
For a while neither of us backed down.

But then . . . all hell broke loose.
He commanded, "Be gone!" and a power surge left me.
I fell at his feet a sobbing wretch.
Amazing . . . I was free at last!

Long ago I got suckered into a "bait and switch" deal
"Fame and significance" in exchange for my soul, why not?
But a crazy, filthy man with open sores wasn't what I imagined.
I sold my soul into slavery with no exit strategy.

But Jesus had mercy on me.
If he can liberate a crazy man like me
He can do it for you too!
Just ask, keep crying out . . .

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!"

AN EVANGELICAL *LECTIO DIVINA*

When we wish to engage in any kind of meditative reading of Scripture, it is important to take a different approach than we normally do when we study God's word. Here are some suggestions to live with the text in the presence of God, cycling through these particular aspects as our hearts lead us, following the "methodless method" of *lectio divina*.

Read the passage slowly (vocalizing the text helps to slow us down), prayerfully listening to what is being read (*lectio*).

Muse on the passage by reading it over and over again, slowly, lingering on a word or phrase, where our hearts are touched (*meditatio*).

Converse with God, in personal, intimate, and open way regarding the deep and secret places that have been touched, of thoughts and of feelings, whether they be what are regarded as "positive" or "negative" ones (*oratio*). Perhaps we may sense God drawing near, an increasing longing for God, an awareness of our specific need for God's grace, etc. (e.g., Phil. 4:6-7, Rev. 3:20).

Pause, now and then, for a time of stillness, waiting, bowing before God (*contemplatio*). At moments, we may be overwhelmed by feelings of reverence, awe, wonder, worship, mystery (e.g., Ps. 62; John 14:21, 23).

Consider the *Daily Bread* devotional guide as exemplifying a manner of *lectio divina*. At the top of the page is a Scripture verse for that day's focus. It is followed by someone's meditation on that verse—reflections that came to mind as the writer pondered that verse. Then, a written prayer is included. Finally, the reader could then be silent to leave room for God to speak through that day's verse, mediation, and prayer.²⁵

To create an opportunity for cycling through all aspects, we will probably need to give a minimum of 20-30 minutes of time set aside from distractions and our "to do" list. If more time can be set aside, the better. Be patient with yourself. It will take time to gain the ability to slow down and go deeper into our hearts. I am still in the learning process.

As I engage in meditative Scripture reading, although I am expectant, I am often *surprised* when a thought comes out of the blue, re-directing my focus from where it was to a new place of thought or feeling, toward a certain word, phrase, or concept that God wanted me to ponder. Consider a few personal examples from various times of meditation. Note that I do not necessarily have this kind of experience every day. From the story of the four who lowered their friend through a roof for Jesus to heal him (Mark 2:1-5), I was prompted to consider, "Am I one who prays for my friends to that degree?" As I read Mark 2:20 ("But the time will come when the bride-

²⁵ Thanks to Paul Bramer for pointing this out.

groom will be taken away from them, and on that day they will fast”) for the first time from that passage I experienced a deep sadness that, of course, Jesus knew so early in his ministry that he would face death in the near future.

From Mark 1:35 (“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed”), I was prompted to wonder how Jesus knew to awaken while it was still dark. The thought came to mind that perhaps the Father himself wakened him and called him to fellowship together. If this was the case, could not God wake me so that we could meet in the morning? That led to some experimentation. For a month or so I did not set my alarm clock to allow God to wake me—a “divine summons”—so that we could fellowship together. I was not asking God to be my alarm clock. On those occasions that I could visit with God next morning, the night before I asked him to wake me for our meeting. God was faithful and so was I for the most part, to be responsive to this early call (on a few occasions I fell back asleep). This personal touch provided significant encouragement for me on these special times together.

SOME FORMATIVE GEMS FROM ANALYTIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

Becoming awakened to a formative focus, I have appreciated various insights that biblical scholars include in their discussions of passages and key terms. Let me share a few examples of some formative gems, mostly relating to our prayer life with God.

The Genesis 18 account of Abraham’s honest prayer depicts an unusual kind of negotiation with God (Gen. 18:20–33). Abraham was concerned about what criterion God would use in bringing judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, so he proposed that God should not destroy the city since some righteous persons lived there. Abraham initially put forward fifty righteous persons as a number worthy of divine pardon for these cities. Eventually he negotiated the limit down to ten righteous people, which God willingly granted (Gen. 18:20–33). But sadly, only four righteous persons could be found (Lot, his wife, and his two daughters), so the city could not be spared from God’s judgment. Unfortunately, ancient scribal editing of Genesis 18:22 has covered up an important detail in this account of prayer. Our English versions read, “Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before the Lord.” Actually, the original text states that it was God who waited before Abraham, as indicated in the NSRV marginal note: “Another ancient tradition reads *while the Lord remained standing before Abraham*.” Terence Fretheim explains, “The subjects were reversed by scribes who thought it indecorous for God to stand before a human being. ‘Remained’ refers more appropriately to God, who remains behind while the two men depart. God seeks to

communicate with Abraham, not the other way around.”²⁶ We learn that God waits patiently before Abraham giving him the opportunity to make explicit the request that is on his mind.

King David penned an eloquent confessional psalm, in which he voices God’s desire for us to be more transparent about what we would rather hide from him. “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in *the inmost place*” (Ps. 51:6, emphasis added). The last term “the inmost place” is an unusual one and often used in a physical context of “‘plugging up’ available water sources.”²⁷ Gerald Wilson draws the connection to Psalm 51:6: “God seeks open access to those parts of our lives that we choose to keep deeply hidden within our inner world.”²⁸ I am still in the process of becoming more transparent with God.

In the Graeco-Roman world, one of the marks of a true friend, as opposed to a flatterer, was candor or “frankness of speech” (Gk., *parresia*)—a freedom to speak one’s mind (cf. 1 Thess. 2:2, 5).²⁹ This particular term appears in the New Testament in the context of praying to God, usually translated as “confidence” (cf. also Eph. 3:12, also translated as “freedom,” or “boldness” NASB). For example, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with *confidence* so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:16, emphasis added), and “Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have *confidence* before [toward] God; and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him” (1 John 3:21–22, emphasis added; cf. 5:14–15). In his commentary on the Epistles of John, Stephen Smalley explains:

The Christian’s courage, in the presence of God . . . arises from a right relationship to him . . . The words . . . “toward God,” express the idea of (a friendly) relationship (between God and his own), as well as the *direction* of the Christian’s confidence . . . The child of God, who walks in the light and obeys the love command, has the privilege of “bold speech” in the presence of God.³⁰

Our amazing God is gracious and welcoming.

²⁶ Terence Fretheim, “Genesis,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1, ed. Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 468.

²⁷ Gerald Wilson, *Psalms*, in *The NIV Application Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 779.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 779.

²⁹ John T. Fitzgerald, ed., *Friendship, Flattery, and Frankness of Speech*, in vol. 82 of *Supplement to Novum Testamentum* (Leiden: Brill, 1966).

³⁰ Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary: 1, 2, 3 John* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 130, 204.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Some time ago I was asking the Lord what topic might be worthwhile for me to study. I was thinking of some particular issue in spiritual formation, or in theological or philosophical foundations of education, which are the areas in which I teach. I happened to be reading through and meditating on the Gospel of Luke and this verse jumped out at me. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Luke 21:33; also Matt. 24:35, Mark 13:31). I got the point. Within my arena of research and teaching, I need to keep God’s Word as an important focus—for it will always bear true when other theories and ideas fall away.

My colleague, Betsy Barber, faculty at the Institute for Spiritual Formation, shares the story of a student who was a children’s pastor. He wanted to help the two and three-year-olds at church be receptive to Scripture. During the opening part of their class time, a short Bible passage is read, and then the children were encouraged to find a quiet place by themselves in the classroom, and given ninety seconds to respond personally to the Word of God. A mother phoned this pastoral associate to share the rest of the story. She was driving in the car with her three-year-old son, Jack, in the back seat. On the radio, tuned to a Christian program, a commercial had played that included a Bible verse. While stopped at a red light, the mother looked in the rear view mirror and saw Jack “sitting very still with his eyes closed, head tipped back and hands raised up. I said, ‘Jack! Jack! What’s wrong? Are you okay?’ And Jack says to me: ‘Mom! We just heard God’s Word, and I’m responding!’”³¹

We can become diligent in both of these approaches to Scripture, analytical study to discern the meaning and significance for our lives. And, regular meditative reading of God’s Word through which God may direct his searching gaze into our hearts. But, regardless of approach, it can be difficult for God’s Word to pierce our hearts when we remain guarded and oblivious to the deep stirrings of our soul.

How can we keep our hearts open to God and his Word?

1. *We keep in touch with our feelings.* God wishes to use his Word to transform both our heart and our head—transforming our feelings and desires as well as our thoughts and beliefs.

2. *We keep it personal.* When we read Scripture we can approach it as a personal encounter with our God. It is the Word of God.

From Psalm 1, we know that meditating on Scripture day and night is an open door for a life of *shalom*—well-being, wholeness, and fulfillment—for God’s Word offers us an entrée into reality we can gain from no other source, as is highlighted in Psalm 19:

³¹ Betsy Barber, “Listening with a Response-Ready Heart,” *Biola Connections* (Fall 2008), 28.

The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together.
The signposts of God are clear and point out the right road.
The life-maps of God are right, showing the way of joy.
The directions of God are plain and easy on the eyes. (Ps. 19:7-8, *The Message*).

My time in Scripture now is often a delight, as it was those many years ago in college, although I believe now there are dimensions I could not have experienced then. I am a different person. Paradoxically, I bring with me two contrasting trajectories in my reading and study of Scripture: greater freedom and sense of flourishing than ever before and, at the same time, deeper awareness of the depths of my sinister compulsions and sinful tendencies. Over the years God has been tenderizing my heart as I remain on this journey inward. An essential component of this formation pilgrimage for me continues to be regularly visiting with God, formatively, through his Word.

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