



“Engaging in the Word”

Psalm 119:97-119; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

God has given us his God-breathed holy Word.

As disciples of Jesus, we are learning to be like the Master in all things. And we learn in many ways: with our head, our heart, and our hands. We learn from the study of Scripture. We learn from our experiences. We learn from imitating more mature disciples. We learn in all the ways that we learn

anything of importance.

Today’s Scripture passages draw our attention to the importance of learning to read Scripture well if we hope to know God better – and the “unlearning” that goes with it.

The “Law”

In the first half of verse 97 of Psalm 119, the word “law” is used to translate the underlying Hebrew word, תּוֹרָה /*torah*. This is the case across most of the Old Testament and reflects a long tradition in the English translation of the Bible. But it presents a problem, because I’m quite sure that most of us hear “law” and we think of a list of rules, at the heart which sits the Ten Commandments. A list of do’s and don’ts, each with its accompanying reward or punishment. As a result, we reduce much of the Old Testament to admonitions to obey God’s “Law,” this list of rules.

Very often, “teaching” or “instruction” would be a better translation of *torah* and is sometimes, though not often enough, the translators’ choice. For we can think of the “list of rules” as life’s instruction book, in which God teaches us what we really need to know about ourselves, the world we inhabit, the problems that plague us, and their solution. Obviously, knowing the truth about such things is far better than living in ignorance or misunderstanding. Thus, God’s “*torah*/teaching” is something for which the people of God have always been thankful. Even in the context of rules, it is far better knowing what they are. If God lives with you, you’d better know the house rules!

But the writer of the artistic masterpiece, Psalm 119, has an even larger meaning of *torah* in view. Peterson’s rendering of verse 97 in *The Message* is enlightening: “Oh, how I love all you’ve revealed; I reverently ponder it all the day long.” This echoes Rabbi Jacob Neusner in *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, where he discusses Jesus and Sabbath-keeping: “From the perspective of the Torah as I understand it, only God is lord of the Sabbath. All things that God wants me to know God had delivered to me in Torah, and it is to all Israel that Moses has revealed the Torah. The Torah teaches me to rest on the Sabbath, because it is how I learn to act like God.” The Torah, this “law” in which the psalmist delights is everything that God has revealed, all the things that God wants us to know. Torah provides God’s answers to the deepest and most important questions of life.

Rabbi Neusner goes on to note the Christian claims about Jesus: “Christ now stands on the mountain, he now takes the place of Torah.” Or more correctly, Christ is Torah. Rabbi Neusner doesn’t agree with our claims about Jesus, but he understands them. We proclaim that Jesus is the full revelation of God. Jesus is everything that God wants us to know. When we see Jesus, we see God. When we know Jesus, we know God.

Look closely at today’s passage from Psalm 119 and note all the different words used to describe God’s revelation: law, commandment, decrees, precepts, word, and ordinances. In every section of the psalm, these words function as synonyms for God’s revelation, pointing to one place, Torah, and one person, Jesus.

The Joy of Torah

Among commentators on Psalm 119, there is general agreement that verses 89-96 are the zenith of the psalm, followed immediately by the celebratory passage that is today’s Scripture passage. After embracing Torah as the expression of God’s faithfulness, the psalmist sings out with joy for the gift of God’s revelation. Clinton

McCann calls verses 97 and 103 “downright sensual.” He writes that “The psalmist is in love with God’s revelation. . . . As is always the case with a beloved person or thing, the psalmist has God’s revelation always in mind.”¹ I guess it’s like the old Frankie Valli song, “You’re just too good to be true; can’t take my eyes off of you.”

How many of us read Scripture for the sheer joy of it? How blessed do we really feel that we are able to come together to study and discuss all that God has revealed to us? Do we celebrate Bible study? Do we treasure the words of Scripture? We talk a lot about loving God and loving Jesus, but do we also love God’s revelation? These are the right questions to ask ourselves as we learn how to be more genuine, light-bearing disciples of Jesus Christ.

Paul on the God-breathed Scriptures

In his letter known as 2 Timothy, Paul, a Jewish Pharisee, urges Timothy to remember what he has learned and who he has learned it from. Like most Jewish boys, Timothy had been steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures from a very early age.² Paul reminds him that those sacred writings are able to instruct Timothy and make him wise for salvation in the faith that is in Jesus Christ. We need to remember that the writings Paul refers to in these verses are not the entire Bible, but only the Old Testament. Though some of the New Testament writings existed and were circulating among the churches, they had not been collected and canonized. Nonetheless, the message of salvation begun in the Old Testament had been fulfilled in the gospel, and that is what Timothy is to preach (2 Tim 4:2). Moreover, just as the Jews had a tradition of sacred and inspired writings, so would the Christians, who came to understand that the writings of the Old Testament and the New Testament were inspired by God in a way unlike any other literature. Paul puts this quite bluntly when, in v. 16, he refers to the sacred writings as *theopneustos*, literally “God-breathed.” Though the process of inspiration is a mystery,³ God is the source of these writings.

The Usefulness of Scripture

Because the Scriptures are “God-breathed,” Paul reminds Timothy that they are “useful” – teaching us, rebuking us, correcting us, and training us. In his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders Paul’s words this way, “Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live in God’s way.” This is pretty much how we learn anything important. We have to be shown the path forward, we have to be shown when we have fallen off the path, we have to be shown how to get back on the path, and then we have to be trained so we can stay on the path.

But this is no intellectual exercise. We do not study the Bible so we can become biblical scholars. Instead, we read and study the Bible because, like Timothy, in its pages we learn of the salvation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible also equips us for good works that serve God and neighbor, build up the body of Christ, and are a good witness to others.

Regrettably, sometimes we try to turn the Bible into the sort of book that we think God ought to have given us rather than the one he did. Sometimes, we try to turn it into some sort of rule book, as if it is no more than a list of do’s and don’ts. Or we try rearranging the Bible into a systematic book of right beliefs. But instead, in his wisdom, God has given us a book of stories about God’s relationship with his people. Even in the writings that don’t seem to be stories, like Paul’s letters to Timothy, we can probably hear God more truly when we listen for the underlying narrative. It is from these stories that we learn what it means to be God’s people.

¹ From McCann’s commentary on the psalms in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*.

² Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Gentile father. He was not circumcised at birth, so he wouldn’t have been considered Jewish. Yet, it is not surprising that his mother would have taught him the Jewish Scriptures. I suppose all this makes him especially well-suited for his work with Paul.

³ Christians do not hold that God dictated the Bible in the same way that Muslims believe God dictated the Quran in Arabic. We believe the Bible is God’s word for his people yet preserves the genuineness of its human authors.

I can imagine someone saying, “I don’t have time for the Bible, all I really need is Jesus.” But how do any of us come to know Jesus? Certainly, we can come to know something of Jesus through our fellowship with other Christians, through prayer, through service and worship. But the only check on our imaginations and wayward hearts is the Bible. Everything we think we know about Jesus has to be tested against Scripture. It is true that even then, the questions and answers often elude us. But still, it is the Bible that keeps us grounded in God’s revelation of himself.

Learning to read the Bible well

You might think you’d have to be some sort of Bible scholar to learn to read the Bible well. But that isn’t the case; it is a matter of how you go about reading and studying. If your reading is always a search for some truism or an answer to the latest question, you will be disappointed and you will ignore much of the Bible. I’ve never found a better approach than that suggested by Richard Hays, which I will paraphrase. There are four steps:

1. Read the passage carefully, paying close attention to the immediate context and to its historical and geographic setting. You are trying to grasp what it meant to those for whom it was first written.
2. Put the passage in its canonical context. In other words, let the rest of the Bible help you to read the passage well. For example, if you are going to read about the role of women in the church, you’d best read everything on the question, not just the passage in front of you.
3. Relate the passage to your own situation. We all tend to grasp Bible passages and immediately try to figure out what they mean for us, bypassing the first two steps. The problem is that the first two steps are the only checks on us finding anything we want in the passage. The goal is to read outward from the Bible, not read into it whatever suits us. The Bible ought to reshape us as opposed to our reshaping it.
4. Now for the toughest task: Live it. This is where we strive to “live into” Scripture, as I’ve heard it put. We want to consciously work with the Holy Spirit to better reflect the image of God that we see in Scripture, to be ever truer disciples of Jesus as we walk the path set out in the Bible for God’s people.

You will sometimes hear people warn about the dangers of studying the Bible for “head knowledge.” That sentiment simply speaks of a Christian who is all about steps 1 and 2, yet never goes on steps 3 and 4. Not much point in that. Conversely, we could also be warned about “heart knowledge,” speaking of a Christian who skips steps 1 and 2, going right on to steps 3 and 4, making of Scripture whatever suits them. Both approaches fail to appreciate what God has given us in the pages of Holy Scripture.

We can’t be divided into “head” and “heart,” we are whole persons. The only question is whether we will read Scripture as well as we can, so we live our life before God as well as we can.

Finally, enjoy the stories

I encourage you to take a book of the Bible, and make your way through it, verse by verse, paragraph by paragraph. You’d be surprised at how much fun you can have doing so. This is because so much of the Bible is comprised of stories . . . short ones, long ones, dramatic ones, funny ones. As I said, sometimes we want to pretend that the Bible is a big rule book, giving us straightforward lists of do’s and don’ts. At other times, we go to it seeking a wellorganized presentation of what we ought to believe. In truth, the Bible is neither. It is largely a book of stories. And we are blessed by this. The longer I teach the Bible, the more I appreciate God’s wisdom in giving us these stories. We can identify with the people whose stories are told; we can see ourselves in them and participate in their journey with God. Stories preserve all the ambiguities and mysteries of life. Life is never so simple as a list or a creed. Stories are easy to remember and to tell. Stories can engage our imaginations and instruct us in ways that lists of rules or systematic theologies never could. Finally, biblical stories nest within one another. The small stories about Abraham and Sarah nest within the larger epic of God’s choosing a people. These larger stories nest within the over-arching biblical story of redemption and restoration. Stories help us to find unity within the rich diversity of Scripture. . . . so read it and live it!