

Examine the Scriptures

Acts 17:10-15

John Breon

The apostle Paul was on the run. He and his associates were traveling through northern Greece. In Thessalonica they went to the synagogue, as was Paul's custom, and on three Sabbath days Paul reasoned with the people and talked about the Hebrew Scriptures. He explained and proved that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. And he proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah. Some of the Jews and a large number of God-fearing Greeks, including some prominent women, were persuaded and became believers. "God-fearers" were Gentiles who respected Judaism, attended synagogue services, and observed some of the Jewish law, though they weren't full converts to Judaism. Many of them were open to the gospel.

So several people in Thessalonica believed the good news and became Jesus followers. But some of the Jews in Thessalonica were jealous. They rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob, and started a riot.

A church leader in England years ago said, "Wherever the apostle Paul went, there were riots. Wherever I go, they serve me tea." He was saying we've lost something of the gospel's power.

That night, the believers in Thessalonica sent Paul and Silas away. They went about sixty miles southwest to the city of Berea. They continued their practice of going to the synagogue, expounding the Hebrew Scriptures, and proclaiming Jesus as Messiah.

Luke, the writer of Acts, says, "Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." This resulted in many of them becoming believers, along with a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.

Then some folks from Thessalonica came and stirred up trouble in Berea. So the believers sent Paul away, but Silas and Timothy stayed in

Berea for a while. When Paul got to Athens, he sent word for Silas and Timothy to join him.

This is a great slice from the account of Paul's travels and gospel proclamation. I want to focus on the description of the people in Berea. They received the message eagerly and they examined or searched the Scriptures daily to see if what they were hearing was true.

That's a great example. Many churches and ministries have adopted the name "Berean" to show that they want to be like that. I hope we all follow the Bereans' example. Just because I say something up here doesn't make it right. I won't intentionally mislead you, but I can be mistaken or just flat wrong. I hope you read the Bible for yourself and check out what you hear from me or Tim or any preacher or Bible teacher or government official.

One of my goals in ministry is to help you know what the Bible actually says and to be able to understand it as well as possible. Thinking about being all that God wants us to be, I believe God wants us to be people who examine the Scriptures and know them for ourselves.

When John Wesley listed "means of grace," those practices that help us be open to God's grace, he included "searching the Scriptures" (see Steve Harper, *Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition*). One way to know God better and to grow in faith is to read and study and discuss and hear the Bible.

But the Bible is big and complex book. We may wonder how we should approach it. How do we understand it and get from God what he wants to give us in the Bible? I once heard the outline of a sermon on the Bible. The preacher said the Bible is like a *treasure*, it's like a *treasure map* and it's like a *trading post*. Those images stuck with me and I want to use them to outline what I'm saying today.

First, the Bible is a treasure—it has value in itself. God inspired the writers of Scripture and God's Spirit helps us and enlightens us when we read Scripture. Because all Scripture is God-breathed, it is useful for teaching the truth, reproving error, correcting faults and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16-17). 2 Peter 1:19-21 also speaks of God as the source of the Scriptures.

Jesus said that he came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (that phrase was a way of speaking of the Old Testament) and that the Law would stand until all of God's purposes are accomplished (Matthew 5:17). Jesus also spoke of the endurance of his own teaching: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31).

Paul said that Israel's experiences in the wilderness are examples to keep us from evil and they were written down as warnings for us (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11). He also said, "Everything that was written down in the past [referring to the OT] was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Hebrews 4:12 says that God's word is living and active. It's sharper than any sword and it penetrates into our hearts to judge our thoughts and intentions.

These are just a few New Testament references to the value and effectiveness of the Scriptures. Though the NT writers were referring to the OT, we can apply their words to the entire Bible as we have it.

The OT repeatedly emphasizes the value and power of God's Law or Word. Psalm 119 is a celebration of God's Law. A classic text is Isaiah 55:11, where God says, "So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

The Bible is a treasure. It has value in itself. *The Bible is also a treasure map. It points beyond itself.* It shows the way to something greater than itself. Martin Luther called the Bible "the cradle that bears Christ to us."

Christ is the center and focus of God's revelation in the Bible. There is in the Bible what we call "progressive revelation." God reveals himself and his will to people in ways that they can understand and receive. God leads them along and helps them grow in this process. God's revelation progresses until it reaches its fullest expression in Jesus Christ.

It's interesting that the Bible is a very human book that reflects the worldviews, cultures, and perspectives of the people who spoke and wrote and compiled it. The Bible didn't just fall out of the sky fully written. Parts of it were told from generation to generation. The various parts of the Bible

were written and compiled over a time span of maybe 1500 years. Still, God speaks in and through the Bible. It's the word of God in human words.

God uses Scripture to make himself known, to give us a way of seeing, to tell his own story. If we want to know the God of the Bible, we need to be familiar with the Bible. We read it both devotionally and studiously.

To get the most out of the Bible we need to be aware that it's not a single book, but it's more like a library of 66 books. It is not all one kind of writing, but it has a variety of literature: history, law, poetry, proverbs, drama, gospels, and letters. Knowing what kind of writing we're dealing with helps us understand it.

We don't have to be "experts" to read and understand the Bible. At the same time, it is important to read and study it together. We make use of the insights of other Christians. We benefit from studies of ancient history, language, and culture. We want to avoid misinterpreting and misusing the Bible. We want to hear what God intended to communicate when a passage of Scripture was written.

One of the most helpful tools for understanding the Bible is a modern translation. I've listed several on your handout.

Some people seem to think that the King James Version (or Authorized Version) of the Bible was the first Bible. Actually, the Bible was not written in English. The OT was written in Hebrew, with some sections in Aramaic. The NT was written in Greek—and not classical Greek, but common Greek, the language of the marketplace.

Later, the Bible was translated into various languages. When Latin was the language most educated people spoke and read, the Latin Bible was important. Then there's a long history of translating the Bible into English before the King James Version in 1611. The translators of the KJV saw their work as revising what had gone before, and they expected their work to be revised. Since the 1800's there have been discoveries of Bible manuscripts that are older than those the KJV translators had available. Also, the English language has changed considerably since the early 1600's. So the need for contemporary English translations led to many such translations in the Twentieth Century and continuing into the Twenty-first.

Study Bibles, Bible handbooks, concordances, commentaries and atlases are some of the other tools that help us get at the Bible's meaning. Our goal in reading and studying the Bible is to get caught up in the adventure, the great story of God's dealings with humanity. So we read to get the grand sweep of Scripture, as well as to find specific examples, instruction, and insight, as well as to explore the depth and height and length and width of God's nature, as well as to be thoroughly biblical Christians.

John Wesley described his approach to Scripture in the preface to a collection of his sermons. As I read it, I'll add some comments.

At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [man of one book]. Here I am, far from the busy ways of men [get quiet, find a quiet place and time]. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book [be aware of God's presence]; for this end, to find the way to heaven [don't read aimlessly, but with purpose]. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate [read thoughtfully, ask questions]? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights [pray, ask God for wisdom].... I then search after and compare parallel passages of Scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual" [let Scripture interpret itself; read obscure passages in light of clear passages]. I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable [apply your mind and reason to understanding Scripture]. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God [talk with other experienced Christians, trusted teachers]; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak [read what others say about the Bible]. And what I thus learn, that I teach [don't keep it to yourself, share; and we want our teaching to be biblical]. (*Wesley's Works* (Jackson Ed.), Vol. 5, Preface, pp. 3-4)

Now that's not the only way—maybe not the best way for you—to read the Bible. But it's a disciplined approach, and that should be one of our goals.

If we'll invest the time and energy to become familiar with the Bible, we'll find it showing us the way to God, to a growing relationship with God, to the way of life in Christ.

This leads to the third image we want to look at: *the Bible as a trading post*. It's where, as the preacher said, you can "exchange a second-hand religion for a first-hand glory."

We don't worship the Bible. We worship the Lord of the Bible. The point of the Bible, the purpose of the Bible is to help bring us into an encounter and a relationship with God's living Word—Jesus Christ. We can come to know for ourselves the God who reveals himself. The Bible becomes God's word for us; it becomes more and more personal. We start experiencing what the Bible talks about. We discover that the Bible's story is our story. We see ourselves reflected in the mirror of God's word (James 1:22-25). We feel the probing of God's word in our hearts. Our church and our lives start being formed by and in God's Word. And that changes our lives.

A little earlier in Acts, Paul and Silas went to Philippi and found a prayer meeting outside town. They met a woman named Lydia. It says, "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message" (Acts 16:14). She and her whole household believed and were baptized.

In the late Fourth Century, there was a young man in North Africa. He lived for his own pleasure and explored the various philosophies of the time. His mother was a Christian and she kept praying for him. Eventually, he started exploring Christian faith. One day, he heard a voice say, "Take it and read." He picked up a Bible he had. It opened to Romans and he read:

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in

carousing and drunkenness, not is sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. (13:11-14)

The word got into his heart and he put his faith in Christ. He went on to become a leader in the church, actually a bishop, and one of the towering theologians in Church history. We know him as St. Augustine (*Confessions*, Book VIII, ch. 12).

About 1000 years later, Martin Luther was a priest and monk in Germany. He struggled with his relationship with God. He had an image of God as almost exclusively angry and harsh. As a teacher, he was preparing lectures on the Book of Psalms. This helped him see God a little more clearly. He was also studying and teaching Romans. And the verse, "The just [or the righteous] shall live by faith" (1:17) spoke to him. His faith and life were changed. This led to the Protestant Reformation.

A couple hundred years later, John Wesley had returned from a failed mission to Georgia. He was in London spending time with Moravians whose faith impressed him on the journeys to and from America. On May 24, 1738, he attended worship that morning and the Psalm spoke to him. Throughout the day, he kept reading passages of Scripture that moved him. That evening he went "very unwillingly to a society [small group] meeting on Aldersgate Street" in London. Someone was reading from Martin Luther's preface to Romans. Wesley wrote in his journal:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation. And an assurance was given me, that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.

I think Wesley was a Christian before this, but that experience opened him up and energized him in new ways. It led to his work in the revival that

swept England and became the Methodist movement. If you read Wesley's sermons, you'll see that they are soaked in Scripture.

I find the Bible speaking to me. Sometimes it's comforting and encouraging, sometimes it's confronting and challenging. Always it's shaping and forming our hearts to be more like Jesus.

Here's a great statement about the Bible:

The Bible isn't "just another book" with a lot of interesting information about God. It is a book in which people find God "coming alive," making his way into their hearts and demanding that they do something about him. He is not a "safe" or a "tame" God, securely lodged behind the bars of a distant heaven; he has the most annoying manner of showing up when we least want him; of confronting us in the strangest ways. And he usually turns out to be very different from the sort of God we would have invented for ourselves. We have to be prepared for surprises and unexpected news. ...The Bible not only tells how God sought his people in the past; it is also a means by which he seeks us out today. (Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You* 9, 16)

What about us? Are we willing to encounter the living Lord of the Bible and let him make real in our lives the things he said and did then? God's Word and God's Spirit are working to shape us into the people of God. Let's not resist God, but receive what he gives and commit ourselves to being truly and thoroughly biblical people of God. That's what God wants us to be.

Ideas and Resources for "Searching the Scriptures"

A brief article on why and how to cultivate the practice of reading Scripture
<https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/cultivating-practice-reading-scripture/>

Online Bible reading plans
<https://www.biblegateway.com/reading-plans/>

Three options for reading the Bible in a year

<https://www.navigators.org/resource/bible-reading-plans/>

Bob Tuttle—read the Bible in a year: Read four chapters a day, starting with Matthew. When you finish the New Testament, go the OT, then the NT again.

John Breon’s current plan: Read one Psalm, three more OT chapters, and two NT chapters four or five days a week. I’ve also done Psalm/two OT chapters/one NT chapter. This is more of an ongoing than a yearly plan.

A comprehensive survey of ways to “engage” Scripture beyond simply reading

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/scripture-engagement/>

Bible Study Helps

A Bible **translation** is a new version based on the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. (Examples: Common English Bible, English Standard Version, New International Version, New Living Translation)

A **revision** updates an earlier translation, often taking into account new manuscript discoveries and changes in English style and usage. (King James Version, New Revised Standard Version).

A **paraphrase** is a loose translation in very informal language. It’s often more the translator’s commentary than a real translation. (*The Living Bible*, J. B. Phillips’ *The New Testament in Modern English*, Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*)

A Bible **concordance** lists words and where to find them in the Bible. (Many editions of the Bible have a concordance at the back. Separately published concordances are also available.)

A Bible **atlas** has maps showing locations of people and events of the Bible. (examples: *The InterVarsity Press Concise Atlas of Bible History*; *Oxford Bible Atlas*)

A Bible **dictionary** defines and describes words, terms, ideas, people and places in the Bible. (example: *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*)

A Bible **commentary** gives background information, explains a passage’s context, compares similar passages, shows various translation possibilities and offers interpretations. Commentaries are available in one volume covering the entire Bible or in multi-volume sets with each volume covering one or more books of the Bible. Some are scholarly and technical while others are simpler. (examples: InterVarsity Press has *Bible Background Commentaries* on the OT and NT. Multivolume, accessible commentaries: John Goldingay, *The Old Testament for Everyone*; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament for Everyone*)

A Bible **handbook** is sort of a condensed one volume commentary. It will include various articles, introductions to Bible books, and very brief commentary on them.

A **study Bible** includes several features of these other helps along with the text. It's important to remember that the study notes are not inspired as the text is. (*The NIV Study Bible; Wesley Study Bible; NIV Essentials Study Bible; Life Application Bible*)

A **devotional Bible** includes notes or articles that aid in personal understanding and application of the Bible's truth. These are usually aimed at special audiences like fathers, mothers, students, support groups, etc.

You can find these at bookstores and online booksellers like www.cokesbury.com or www.amazon.com.

Overviews, Introductions, and Resources for Digging Deeper

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Third Edition.

An introduction to interpreting Scripture. It focuses on different types of literature in the Bible. Gives some guidance on selecting a translation and an overview of commentaries and other tools.

Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*.

The title pretty much says it all. Introductions to and outlines of each book of the Bible.

John Goldingay, *A Reader's Guide to the Bible*.

A basic introduction to the books of the Bible in their times and settings.

Sandra L. Richter, *The Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament*.

Aims to help organize our thinking about Scripture and its big ideas like redemption and covenant.

N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*.

Explores how God's authority is expressed in and through the Bible while also looking at different ways to approach Scripture.

The Bible isn't "just another book" with a lot of interesting information about God. It is a book in which people find God "coming alive," making his way into their hearts and demanding that they do something about him. He is not a "safe" or "tame" God, securely lodged behind the bars of a distant heaven; he has the most annoying manner of showing up when we least want him; of confronting us in the strangest ways. And he usually turns out to be very different from the sort of God we would have invented for ourselves. We have to be prepared for surprises and unexpected news. ...The Bible not only tells how God sought his people in the past; it is also a means by which he seeks us out today. (Robert McAfee Brown, *The Bible Speaks to You* 9, 16)

Summary of Sermon Series on “Being All that God Wants Us to Be”

As we read the Bible and pray, “God bless this church and help us be all that you want us to be in Jesus’ name,” various passages stand out as specific examples of “all that God wants us to be.” In a way, everything we read in the Bible can help us see something of God’s intention. But during this season these passages seemed particularly relevant. Hopefully, these examples will help us look for more of what God is saying to us as we continue to read and pray.

Delivered from Sin and Death—Exodus 12:1-13; Matthew 26:17-30

True Disciples, Established in the Truth and Set Free—John 8:31-32; 2 Peter 1:12

Abide in God, Walking as Jesus Walked—1 John 2:5-6

A Living Sacrifice with God’s Presence in Us—Genesis 15; Romans 12

Having God Always Before Us—Psalm 16

Living by the Scriptures—Acts 17:10-15

Having Our Hearts Cleansed—Matthew 15:1-20

Having Our Hearts Stirred to Work and Give—Exodus 35:30-36:7

Belonging to God’s Unshakable Kingdom—Daniel 7:14; Hebrews 12:28

Being Anointed by/Filled with the Holy Spirit—Luke 4:14-21; Acts 2:1-4

Being Part of the Church Launched by the Holy Spirit—Acts 1-2

Some other passages that summarize who we are as God’s people. These will reward prayerful reading

Matthew 5-7; Romans 12:1-21; 1 Corinthians 13; 2 Corinthians 3:12-7:1; Galatians 5:22-6:10; Ephesians 4:20-6:20; Philippians 2:3-16; 4:4-9; Colossians 3:1-4:6; 1 Peter 2:1-3:16; 2 Peter 1:2-10; 1 John 4:7-21