

**Reading the Bible to Discover What It  
Says Not What We Want it to Say**  
~ 2 Peter 1 16-21

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We are focused this ministry year on 2 Corinthians 3:18 as our theme verse. It's on the front page of your programs/bulletin. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

But why do we need to be transformed? The Bible tells us that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We are stained by our sin nature. We need rescue to be made right with God. Jesus provided that rescue by sacrificing Himself for us on the cross. His death and blood paid the penalty for our sin so that we could be saved and enter into an eternal relationship with God. But once we're saved we need to grow in holiness. We need God to do His transforming work in our lives to change us to become more and more like Christ. Our theme verse describes one way God transforms us: 'When we with unveiled faces behold or see the Lord's glory, the Holy Spirit does a transforming work in us.'

But how do we "behold or see the glory of the Lord?" How do we see the Lord's glory? We can see it in creation. Psalm 19:1 - "The heavens declare the glory of God." We can see it in Jesus. John 1:14 - "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. We can see it in the Gospel that God shone in our hearts. 2 Corinthians 4:6 - "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness" has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." We can see it in the Scriptures themselves. In a sense, this is the purpose of the whole Bible - to display and give glory to God.

So if we can potentially see the God's glory in Scripture, we need to get into the Bible. This Fall we have looked at that. We acknowledged it has been attacked and many discard it or dismiss as irrelevant for our world. Even among Christians, many turn to secondary sources for understanding or authority rather than the Bible. We asked "what view do you hold of the Bible and learned to put more trust in the God who holds us rather than the view we hold. We asked "Why do we need a Bible?" One way God the creator chose to communicate to us is through the written word. We saw how the average person can know the Bible is true by receiving spiritual sight to see in it God's self-authenticating glory.

We thought about why people don't believe the Bible to be true. One reason is they suppress the truth about God. We considered how Bible reading can lead to life transformation. We saw that with the eyes of our heart opened, we can see God as glorious and desirable. This displaces deceitful desires in our hearts. As we begin to desire God more our lives change by the power of the Holy Spirit. Over the last 3 messages, we have talked about Reading God's Word with God. We approach God's Word with humility, prayer and God's promises.

So in our very last message on this topic this fall, I want to get down to the nitty gritty of actually reading the Bible. I need to address this because it's where the rubber meets the road. We can talk about reading the Bible all we want. But actually doing it is the problem. So many Christians struggle just to get to or stay with their Bible reading.

So I aim to answer four questions today. 1. Why should Christians pay attention to what the Scriptures say? 2. What purpose for reading must we adopt when reading the Scriptures? 3. What obstacles stand in our way of reading the Bible? 4. In spite of them, how can read the Bible today in a way that depends on God and can bring deep transformation to our lives? I pray this will be a great encouragement to you about the possibility of connecting with God more deeply through His Word. The answer to the first question is found in our Scripture passage today. 2 Peter 1:16-21.

**2 Peter 1:16-21 (ESV) (Page 861)**

<sup>16</sup>For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup>For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," <sup>18</sup>we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. <sup>19</sup>And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, <sup>20</sup>knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. <sup>21</sup>For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

A guy named Peter wrote this passage. He walked with Jesus as one of the 12 disciples. He became a leader in the early church. The Lord used him to spread the Gospel. But now he faces the end of his life. In 2 Peter 1:14 he writes, "I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me." It seems there was significant hostility towards Christians from the Romans at this time. So they targeted the leaders. Church tradition tells us that they sentenced Peter to crucifixion. But he did not consider himself worthy to die the same way Christ did. So he requested to be crucified upside down.

But before that happens, Peter has one final letter to send to believers. Apparently, some teachers spread wrong teaching. They questioned the whole Christian story. And they taught that it didn't really matter how you lived. Even if your life looked like the common pagan life, that was no big deal.

Peter sees this greatly threatening the church. So in the passage just before ours, he reminds Christians that God gives His divine power to us so that we have everything we need for life and living Godly lives. Simply depending on God and His power is the key to living the Christian life. Peter lists characteristics of growing Christians – faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love. When you see these characteristics in a fellow believer's life, it is likely they walk by the Spirit and depend on the Lord for strength. Peter declares it right to remind us of these characteristics to keep us alert and focused on this God-dependent life.

But then in our passage he addresses a charge made against him and the other disciples. It went something like this – The Christian story is a collection of cleverly devised myths. These myths are used by Christians to control followers and maybe to gain power.” You might have heard something very similar today like “The Bible is a collection of fables or myth stories that make up the Christian faith.” I’ve seen this charge show up in the comments section after a news article or post on social media. A Christian makes a point quoting the Bible. Someone responds with something like “the Bible is a collection of myths.” Or “you Christians can spend time with your imaginary friend, but the rest of us need to deal with the real world.”

How does Peter respond? He give his testimony as a witness. Verse 16 – “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” In verse 17, Peter talks about an event where Jesus’ majesty was clearly displayed. “For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.” So that’s another claim of a witness – not an eyewitness but an ear witness. “We heard this very voice.” So he’s talking about the time, reported in the Gospels, when Jesus appeared for a few moments in his unveiled divine glory. It’s known as the Transfiguration. His face shone like the sun and his clothes were white as snow. Peter, James and John fell on their faces knowing they were in the presence of God. Peter reviews this to say “the Christian story is not a bunch of cleverly devised myths we put together.” We are simply telling what we saw and heard.

Now a skeptic can come along and challenge Peter's word. "That's just your word. You heard a voice from heaven? That sounds like you were not only seeing and hearing but smoking something to give him that kind of experience. We can't trust what people said in the Bible!" But to such a charge I always like to ask "how do we know anything about history especially history before recording devices like sound or video recorders. You may have heard of a French Emperor named Napoleon. He went across Europe fighting battles and conquering. But how do we know that actually happened? We have some written accounts of these battles. Where did they get those? Eyewitnesses who reported what happened and wrote it down. So there is a double standard in our world today. People readily accept ancient writings that support their preferred version of history. But then they immediately discount the Bible's eyewitnesses.

Peter goes on. He has just put a stake in the ground to declare I am an eyewitness to Jesus' life and what God has done. Then verse 19 – "And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed." The translation you read from may say this a little differently. One says this "We have also a more sure word of prophecy." So Peter could mean that the Transfiguration of Jesus confirmed the prophecies of the Old Testament and gave more strength to them. But I think it's more likely he's saying "I know I'm an eyewitness and you may or may not believe me. But we do have the sure word of prophecy written hundreds of years ago that foretold Jesus. Those prophecies mean we couldn't have just come up with cleverly devised myths about Jesus the Christ.

Then he writes something critical to our Bible reading found in the second part of verse 19. "And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention." Pay attention to; give heed to; follow. Actively turn your mind to the prophetic word as an object of your personal interest and faith. Invest yourself in the written word of God. Do it as if you are in a dark room and it is the only light. For that is in fact the reality.

I have to skip the latter part of verse 19. But we need to get to verses 20 and 21 to answer our first question. Why do Christians need to pay attention to the Scriptures which today means the Bible? Notice the question comes out of verse 19. You need to pay attention to the prophetic word. But why? Verse 20 "Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation." What does that mean? King James says "no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation." The New International Version says "No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation." I think that's the right sense of this verse. Some have said

this verse proves there should be no private or personal interpretation of Scripture. There is wisdom in that. People can come up with all kinds of crazy interpretations of the Bible that need to be tested by other Christians. I think he's making the point that the prophets did not just make up their own interpretations. This is confirmed in verse 21.

"For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." So the prophets of Israel's didn't just sit around, look out their window and come up with something inspiring by themselves to write down or speak. They received a word or vision from God and were somehow carried along by the Holy Spirit as they wrote. The word carried is a sea-faring term that described the wind that moved ships. So this verse speaks to the God-inspired nature of the Scriptures. Somehow God carried along the Bible's authors by the Holy Spirit. But He didn't obliterate their personalities in this carrying on. He spoke through their experiences, writing style and personality to produce the different Scriptures. But the main point is they spoke from God.

So here's the answer to our first question. **Why should Christians pay attention to what the Scriptures say? Because the authors spoke from God.** If we are growing Christians, we will want to connect with God. Through Him we receive life, strength, hope and healing. Through Him comes wisdom, counsel and teaching. From God we receive power to resist temptation, make the hard choice, say the difficult word, action the next step in a ministry. You can receive God's Word by paying attention to the Scriptures. So we need to read the Scriptures.

**What purpose of reading must we adopt?** People read with different purposes. We might read to confirm our beliefs or understanding. We might read to prove a point or for entertainment. We might read to pass a course. But we must read the Bible with the purpose of **discovering what the author intended to communicate**. Now in some ways, it is ridiculous that I even have to say this. Everyone knows you're supposed to read to get what the author says and then respond. But this purpose has been set aside in many situations today especially concerning the Bible. Many come to the Bible with an agenda or to strengthen their case. So they come not looking to discover what the Bible says but for a verse they can use to prove their point or affirm their perspective. So think about this, when supporting my preference or perspective becomes the main purpose in Bible reading, what happens when you find a verse or passage that does not fulfill this purpose? You ignore it. You dismiss it. Or you interpret it to mean something different than what the author intended. It's understandable why this happens. There's passages in the Bible that are hard to stomach that we might find offensive or may speak against our lifestyle. So we have to spin it so we remain

comfortable. But when we do that we have to realize we're trying to put a spin on God's Word. No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man. These writings are inspired by God. If we want to hear from God, we actually have to spend time discovering what H says.

But this is not easy. There are significant obstacles against reading to paying attention to what the Bible actually says. I could list many – moral reasons; schedules; the opinions of others about the Bible. But I'm just going to give you 3 subtle realities that go against a desire to discover what God's Word says.

**1 - Our visual, image-based culture trains us to be more passive than active.** We look at movies, videos, TV, computer screens, tablets and phones where stuff happens without us doing much. This encourages a passive mindset. We learn to expect something on the screen to do something to stimulate us or keep our attention. So we don't do the doing. The video does the doing. But in reading, we have to do the doing. So if we spend a lot of time passively looking, it becomes harder to actively read. It takes more brain power to read. So if we are tired, we are more likely to plop in front of a screen instead of trying to discover what an author says.

**2 – Our visual, image based culture discourages focused attention.** When we watch a video, movie or TV, the image changes every 3 or 4 seconds. So we get trained to expect constant visual change to keep our attention. Reading doesn't bring that constant visual change. It is harder to stay focused – in fact some of you may have already tuned me out and gone to your phone to experience visual stimulation because you find someone talking not enough stimulus. Yet the scriptures call us to give focused attention to God Psalm 123:1 says 'To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!' To 'lift our eyes' does not mean take a look. It describes a 'steady, reflective, adoring gaze filled with longing & desire'. Such a gaze requires focused attention & focused yearnings of our heart on the Lord. But expecting visual movement every 2 or 3 seconds can work against that.

**3– Our visual, image based culture encourages a fragmented approach to gaining information.** So take YouTube for example. I really like it for all the info you can gain. I have fixed problems in my cars just by watching other people do it on YouTube. But say you are looking up a question and you don't like what the video says or you aren't getting the info that addresses your specific question. You can jump forward on the video or find another one until you get the info you want. That can work for specific problems. But it doesn't work if someone is trying to make a point or an argument to persuade. That often happens in the Bible. But if we read it like a You Tube video, we can miss the

point. Or if we don't get something we want in the first couple of verses we read, then we jump forward or we give up or go somewhere else for answers. Those are just three obstacles to our reading the Bible to actually discover what it says.

But we must not let these obstacles stop us. It is still possible to read and discover the author's intent. But it will take time, effort and most importantly the help of God. Aren't those three necessary for any healthy relationship – time together, effort and help from God. When we read to discover what the Bible author said, it greatly increases the likelihood that we will hear from God. So we must read **Actively and not Passively**. How? Follow the pattern we've looked at over the last three weeks.

A<sup>1</sup> – Admit that you can do nothing apart from Jesus – approach God's Word humbly.

P – Pray – Invite God to speak and do a work in your heart.

T – Trust a specific promise of God as you go into reading.

A – Act – Read. But not passively just expecting the Bible to grab our attention or entertain us. Discover what the author said.

T – Thank the Lord for what He reveals and what He does.

You can use that APTAT acronym not only for Bible reading but for your entire life. But especially as we read this way, it is much more likely that we will live 2 Corinthians 3:18.

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<sup>1</sup> This acronym comes from the work of John Piper. I heard it several years ago in a message I listened to. He works through it in greater detail more recently in "Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture, (Wheaton, Illinois, Crossway, 2017), 244-246.