

SELF-FEEDER

A Book Unlike Any Other Book

Psalm 12:6

Lesson 1

I own a number of books. One is a family heirloom. It is a daily-devotional book that was published early in the twentieth century. It belonged to my paternal great-grandmother. The pages are worn, and the binding is weak. It contains many handwritten prayers. In addition, my great-grandmother used the book to document major family events. On some pages I can read of the death of ancestors I never knew personally. On other pages I can read of the births of family members — aunts, uncles, cousins, and my own father! Perhaps you can understand why such a book is so special to me.

Some books are more special than others. When it comes to the book we call the Bible, we should develop a conviction that the Bible is the most special book of all. Why do so many Bibles go unread? Why do some seem like little more than a family keepsake, just another decoration within the home, or simply another volume on a cluttered bookshelf? The reason for neglect of the Bible often springs from a weak understanding of the Bible's worth.

The Psalmist sang of the excellencies of God's word by saying, "The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times (Psalm 12:6). In the ancient world, silver was one of the most precious metals known to humanity (Proverbs 2:4; 3:14). The furnace was a place of refining and proving (Proverbs 17:3; 27:21). Seven was regarded as a number of perfection (Proverbs 6:16, 31; 9:1; 24:16; 26:16, 25). The lyrics of Psalm 12 extolled the Word of God as being a most precious and perfect possession.

J.I. Packer spoke of the nature of the Bible by saying, "Holy Scripture should be thought of as God preaching — God preaching to me every time I read or hear any part of it — God the Father preaching God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit." Packer's description of Scripture is helpful. It reveals that the Bible is indeed a special book. Even more, it upholds the Bible as a supernatural book. In what follows, we will examine Packer's definition of Scripture and the actual pages of Scripture in order to learn more about why the Bible is a book unlike any other book. Our aim in doing so will be to encourage ourselves to become disciples who are self-feeders, disciples who are personally committed to feeding and feasting on the Word of God.

1. The Trinitarian Nature of the Bible

Christianity is unique from all other world religions because of its assertion that God exists in three persons — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Although it does not appear in Scripture, the word "Trinity" is often used to speak of the Lord's three-in-one nature.

I recently had a conversation with college students who told of a friend who was skeptical of the Christian faith because of the Bible's teaching on the Trinity. The young man said he couldn't accept Christianity because he couldn't understand the Trinity. The realities of the Trinity are mysterious. Indeed, we may never be able to completely understand how the Lord God exists in three persons. However, truth concerning the Trinity teaches us a lot about God's nature.

Such is especially true when it comes to the doctrine of the Bible. The fact that God exists in three persons reveals that God is a communicative God. What was God doing before time began? He was enjoying sweet fellowship amongst himself (Genesis 1:26). There was a perfect harmony of love between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (John 17:24).

What do these things have to do with the Bible? Everything. The Trinity indicates that the one, true God is a God who speaks. The Bible is God's written revelation of himself. One has noted, "There is no doctrine of Scripture which is not essentially trinitarian." The Bible is a supernatural, Trinitarian book. Such truth is upheld by Packer's definition of Scripture — "Holy Scripture should be thought of as...God the Father preaching God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit."

Jesus made reference to these realities. In giving his disciples instruction concerning the way they would be the Lord's New Testament revelatory vessels, he said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13-14). Notice Jesus' reference to all three persons of the Trinity. He indicated that the Scriptures come to us by the administration of the Father, through the agency of the Spirit, for the purpose of announcing the atoning work of redemption accomplished by the Son.

Realization of these realities can do a lot to foster a stronger devotion to Scripture in our lives. Some are weak in their devotion to the Bible because they see it as being little more than another book. Even if they regard it as a divine book or an otherworldly book, many lose sight of the supernatural, trinitarian nature of the Bible. Scripture loses its luster for those who don't see it as a Trinitarian communication of the Father's program of redemption, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit. However, when one sees the Bible as a means of having fellowship with the beautiful, Triune God, one will be more likely to cherish its pages.

2. The Inspiration of the Bible

On our smartphones, there is a feature that notifies us of the source of calls we receive. If you are like me, you quickly deny incoming calls from "Unknown" or "Spam Risk." However, you are more likely to answer when a call comes from a close family member. The source of a call or message has a lot to do with how we respond. Something similar is true in the spiritual realm. The source of Scripture should shape the way we approach Scripture.

J.I. Packer's definition of Scripture alluded to the divine source of the Bible. He spoke of Scripture being the very words of God. He said Scripture is "God the Father preaching..." When one reads the Bible, one does not read the mere thoughts of men

and women. Instead, one reads the thoughts of God. Indeed, the entire canon of Scripture can be regarded as one lengthy sermon — “God the Father preaching....”

Scripture extols the heavenly nature of Scripture. Old Testament and New Testament authors alike frequently spoke of the Bible as containing “the Word of the Lord” (Genesis 15:1-4; Joshua 8:8; Psalm 18:30; Isaiah 1:10; Hosea 1:1; Acts 8:25; 1 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 1:25). Such a designation pointed to the source of Scripture — God Himself. Though the Lord used human instruments to declare and record the words of Scripture, He superintended such things through a process of revelation known as “inspiration.”

Paul spoke of these realities when writing to Timothy: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). The original language of Paul’s words used a compound word that meant “God-breathed.” The apostle’s intent was to depict Scripture as coming from the mouth of God. We know that God doesn’t have a mouth, because God is a Spirit (John 4:24; Revelation 4:3). However, Paul used what is known as an anthropomorphism, applying human character traits to God. His purpose in doing so was to emphasize the divine source of Scripture.

In regard to the origin of Scripture, one Dutch reformer said, “The primary, yes, the only essential cause is God.” Such a perspective is critical to developing a strong affection and appreciation for the Bible. If we regard Scripture as being little more than the mere words of men, we will be less likely to read it, study it, and be transformed by it. May we pray for “more grace” (James 4:6). May we ask the Lord to give us a high regard for Scripture in which we see it as containing the very words of God. When we see the Bible in such a light, we will be more likely to make it a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths (Psalm 119:105).

3. The Authority of the Bible

Authority isn’t a word that carries a good reputation nowadays. Most automatically think of it in a negative fashion. Oftentimes, many people think of the concept in relation to bad experiences with unhealthy authority figures. I can relate. My first experiences in the workplace exposed me to supervisors and bosses who seemed to abuse their positions of influence and power.

Despite negative conceptions of authority, it is important that we don’t throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. Scripture asserts that the Lord has authority over all things (Isaiah 40:22). When it comes to the Lord and His Word, we must understand that his authority is of a superior sort. This is true because He is holy (Isaiah 6:3). He can do no wrong, he is absolutely true, and he is in no way tainted by sin. As a result, his exercise of his authority is both good and just.

Because of his authority, the Lord’s words are inherently authoritative. Packer’s definition of Scripture alluded to this reality through the way it spoke of Scripture as “God the Father preaching....” Since God has all authority, his words carry the weight of authority. Packer would later explain: “Authority, the right to rule, belongs ultimately to God the Creator, and Christianity is ultimately a matter of bowing to His authority by obedient response to His revelation. On this formula all Christians agree. All, therefore, acknowledge Scripture, the written record of God’s revelation, as in some sense authoritative for faith in life.”

The logic behind Packer's perspective is as follows: God has all authority; the Bible is inspired by God; thus, the Bible is authoritative. But does Scripture actually claim authority for itself? Yes, it does. When the prophets spoke, they often confessed that their words were often the words of the Lord. Since their words were of God, they maintained that God's people were obliged to listen to them. Isaiah began his prophecy by saying, "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 1:2). God's people are bound to listen to what God says because what God says come from God himself.

Jesus upheld the authoritative nature of God's Word. In speaking of his revelation of the Father's truth, he said, "But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me" (John 5:36). Jesus compared his ministry with the ministry of John the Baptist. Though the baptizer indeed had a heaven-sent message and ministry, his work paled in comparison to that belonging to Jesus. Our Lord and his apostles had a greater "testimony," since they spoke by divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Commenting on Jesus' words in John, the Dutch Reformer mentioned above said, "God has no superior and therefore no one is in a position to give authority to His words." The implication is that God's words have a natural authority since they come from him.

Pastor Geoffrey Thomas has remarked on the way many have a tendency to kick against the authority of Scripture. He links such a spiritual malady to Adam and Eve's first transgression in the Garden of Eden. Isn't it true that our first ancestors failed because of their refusal to submit to God's Word? In taking of the forbidden fruit, were they not guilty of exalting their perspective above the word of the Lord? Thomas has bemoaned how the mindset of Adam and Eve continues to this day, saying that the most oft-repeated phrase in Bible study over the last one hundred years has been, "Well, I think of God like this" In the end, our conceptions of God are not what's most important. Instead, what God says carries the greatest weight. His Word is authoritative.

An understanding of these things should shape our Bible study. To become healthy self-feeders of God's Word, we must have a high regard for the authority of Scripture. We can't approach the word with a personal agenda. We must have the frame of mind Eli encouraged of young Samuel, regularly telling the Lord, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears" (1 Samuel 3:9).

4. The Central Theme of the Bible

In modern society, most people are well familiar with movies, tv shows, and other forms of story-driven entertainment. Consequently, most are familiar with how a plot works. Main characters, events, and a timeline meld together to create an over-arching storyline that sets the agenda for a movie, tv show, or Netflix series. In a matter of seconds, one can discern the overall plot through a television commercial or web advertisement. A more intriguing story is more likely to draw more viewers. I myself recently watched a historical crime movie that was based on real events. Having heard of the film's plot, I was drawn to watch it.

When it comes to the Bible, there is a clear storyline that runs through the pages of Scripture. Being aware of this storyline can do a lot to garner a greater enthusiasm

for Scripture in our hearts. We will talk more about this later in our study. For now, we want to give a basic acknowledgment to this reality. Packer's definition inferred that there is a storyline to Scripture through the way it said Scripture is "God the Father *preaching God the Son...*

Notice from Packer's definition that Jesus is the focus of Scripture. The entire Bible is one big story of how the Father sent his Son to remedy humanity's sin problem in order to bring glory to the Lord. Jesus can be seen in the earliest pages of the Bible in the words of Genesis 1:1 and 26. He was first explicitly spoken of in Genesis 3:15. Paul spoke of how all of Scripture told of Christ by telling Timothy, "...from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15).

In the Old Testament, all of the Law provided foreshadowing that told of the coming of Christ. The books of Jewish history laid the groundwork for the coming of the Davidic king. Wisdom literature within the Hebrew Scriptures promoted the wisdom of Christ. The prophets gave details concerning Messiah's coming.

In the New Testament, the gospels told of Christ's advent and his work on behalf of sin. The book of Acts relayed important information about Christ's birth. All the epistles explained the work of Christ in greater detail. The book of Revelation told of how Christ is coming again.

Michael Reeves has commented on how Christ is central to the revelation of God's Word: "...the point of all the Scriptures is to make Christ known. As the Son makes his Father known, so the Spirit-breathed Scriptures make the Son known." Knowledge of such truth can do a lot to flame the fire of our fervency for God's Word. Many are dull in their devotion to the Bible because they see it as an antiquated book full of confusing stories, rituals, and teachings. However, when one is aware that the Bible is primarily about a person, the God-Man Jesus, one will be more likely to consume its truth.

5. The Folly of a Human-Centered Approach to Scripture

Our previous point leads to our next. If Scripture has Jesus as its theme, as Packer has said, it stands to reason that we are not the focal point of Scripture. Some err in this regard. They approach Bible reading and study with a self-driven perspective. Placing themselves into every story, ordinance, and teaching of the Bible, they miss the true storyline of Scripture. They approach their time in God's Word with an unhealthy eye on self. Instead of seeking to know Christ better, they seem only interested in getting answers for their problems, their future, and their relationships.

Don't get me wrong. Scripture certainly gives us truth for all of life; however, it does so by focusing on Christ first. Scripture is not primarily about us. Sure, it speaks of us, but it only does so to point to our Redeemer. We are not the center of the story of Scripture. Jesus is. Martyn-Lloyd Jones has commented, "There are many...offering Christ to people as a friend or helper or sympathizer, as one who can understand them, as one who will be with them. All that is absolutely true, but you do not start with it." Christ, not self, is the grand scheme of Scripture.

All of this is of chief importance as we learn how to study the Word of God for ourselves. If we start our study with the wrong perspective, we will surely make mistakes. Our explanation and application of any given passage will likely go astray

from the Lord's original intent. Worst of all, a self-oriented perspective will keep us from gazing upon the soul-liberating, life-transforming realities of the gospel. In her book "Women of the Word," Jen Wilken has said, "If I read the Bible looking for myself in the text before I look for God there, I may indeed learn that I should not be selfish. I may even try harder not to be selfish. But until I see my selfishness through the lens of the utter unselfishness of God, I have not properly understood its sinfulness." Can you see how important to keep the perspective in this matter? Christ, not self, is the focus and fulcrum of the Bible.

6. The Power of the Holy Spirit in Scripture

Last of all, Packer's definition indicated that Scripture is special because of its intrinsic power. Note his reference to "...the power of God the Holy Spirit." When Scripture is read, studied, and applied to one's life, it has potential to unleash the supernatural strength of the Almighty. The same Spirit that hovered over the surface of the water at the beginning of creation now hovers over the Word of God. This is true because the Scriptures were produced by the Holy Spirit. Peter said, "...no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. 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" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Because of Scripture's Spirit-wrought nature, Paul called it "the sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17). As a spiritual sword, the Word of God has supernatural power to perform a powerful spiritual work within the souls of men and women. The author of Hebrews said, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

I like the metaphor found within the words above. It reveals that God's Word has power to perform something similar to unseen, spiritual surgery in the human soul. I can remember a surgery I had on one occasion. A skilled doctor used medical instruments to cut into my abdomen and to remove a diseased part of my body. From my perspective, he performed a skilled work that I could not have performed. He enacted a positive change to my physical constitution that I could not have accomplished.

Scripture does something similar for us. It performs supernatural surgery on our spiritual constitutions. We don't have power to transform our spiritual minds or souls, but God's Word does. It is invested with Holy Spirit power to change God's people. One has commented on these realities:

The Word of God is the only power that can subdue the rebellion of our heart. There is a power in our fallen nature which revolts against divine truth, and which nothing human can overcome. No teaching of man will do it, not even that of your father or your mother. The teaching of the church and of the most beloved pastors will not do it, nor time-worn tradition, which is the teaching of the ages. All this is as powerless as the slenderest thread to lift the weight which presses us down. To make the kingdom of God enter our hearts we need a battering-ram that can overthrow the strongest walls, and that ram is the Word of God.

The fact that God's Word is invested with such power demonstrates why the Bible is a book unlike any other book. Additionally, such truth should motivate us to become Scriptural self-feeders who regularly read and ingest God's Word.

Conclusion: Where We Are Going in This Study...

As we close our study on the nature of the Bible, I would like to encourage you in your commitment to God's Word and I would like to provide an overview of the rest of our study. In regard to the scope of our study, we are going to approach our subject by studying the following:

- Daily Bread: Regularly Feeding on God's Word
- The Story of Scripture
- The Storyline of Scripture
- E.A.R.S. — Interpretative Tools
- E.A.R.S. — Interpretative Traps
- Explanation — Unlocking the Original Meaning of a Passage
- Application — Understanding the Meaning of a Passage for God's People
- Respond — Understanding How God Wants You to Respond to A Passage
- Share — Understanding How You Can Share What You Have Learned

Regarding your commitment, I would encourage you not to let anything keep you from becoming a self-feeder. Pray and ask that the Lord would give you a holy zeal and concern regarding these matters. I recently read a story about one who had a dogged determination to make God's Word a part of his life:

The Wonder of the Word of God relates the challenging story of a man in Kansas City who was badly injured in an explosion. After losing his eyesight and the use of both hands, the man was greatly distraught, for he could never read the Bible again. His distress turned into joy after hearing of a woman in England who read Braille with her lips. He searched and found a copy of the Bible in Braille. Sadly, he was discouraged again when he realized the nerve endings in his lips were too damaged to recognize the characters on the pages. One day, as he lifted the raised lettering up to his lips, his tongue touched a few of the letters. He thought to himself, "I could read the Bible with my tongue."

The author who shared that story reported how the man ended up reading through the Bible numerous with the use of his lips. He then remarked, "Prayerfully, this man will not be standing next to you (or me) when we are called before the Bema Seat of Christ. His diligence is a conviction reminder that there will be no excuse for laziness in regard to reading or memorizing God's Word." Pray and seek the Lord's grace so that you might grow into a disciple who values Scripture.