

HANDLING SCRIPTURE WELL

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ED MACKENZIE EXPLORES KEY PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE OUR READING OF SCRIPTURE.

How do we handle scripture well? How should we approach it if we confess it to be 'living and active' (Hebrews 4:12), able to shape our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ? We begin by trusting that scripture really is God's word to us. Despite being separated from the biblical world in time and place, despite the effort and discipline required to read it regularly, and despite those times when it appears that the text fails to connect with our hearts, we approach the Bible trusting that God speaks through it.

When we approach the Bible this way, we follow our Lord's example. Jesus assumed that the Old Testament scriptures were God's Word. He cited them in his teaching (Mark 10:2-9), relied on them in his temptations (Matthew 4:1-11) and pointed to them as uniquely authoritative (Matthew 5:17-20). Moreover, just as Jesus trusted these words, so too did his earliest followers. Open up any book of the New Testament and you will find citations or allusions to the Old Testament. The New Testament writings were soon recognised as equally inspired (2 Peter 3:16), part of God's providential plan to build up his people.

Searching the scriptures is a 'means of

grace,' as Wesley put it, a way in which God changes us. Encountering the Bible means that we meet the God who breathes through it, the God who makes known his face in Jesus Christ. The Spirit speaks through these words.

But when we hold closely to that trust, what do we need to bear in mind as we seek to read the Bible wisely?

READING CAREFULLY

Firstly, we read scripture carefully. I begin with this point because all too often we allow our own questions, our own agendas, and our own assumptions to shape what scripture means. We move too quickly to the question 'what is God saying to me now?' While that's an important question, a careful reading of scripture begins by asking, 'what was God saying then?'

A careful reader takes time with the text, time to really grasp what it's saying. Careful readers think about the main point of the passage, identifying its key words and themes. They seek to trace the flow of the story or the argument. When we seek to dwell under God's Word, we need to make sure we've heard it correctly. We need to listen to it carefully.

READING CONTEXTUALLY

Secondly, we read Scripture contextually. This, of course, is a dimension of careful reading, since careful readers always make sure that they place the text in

the right context. Focusing on literary context is often a good place to begin, asking questions like, 'what appears before and after this passage?' and 'how does this text fit within the flow and the structure of the book?' We also need to consider the genre of the text we're reading. We interpret a proverb differently to a prophetic oracle, for instance, and a letter differently to a lamentation.

Thinking about the historical context is also important, and here Bible dictionaries or commentaries can be helpful. It can also be useful to have a rough mental map of key events within biblical history, such as the exodus, the exile and the fall of Jerusalem.

READING CANONICALLY

Thirdly, we read scripture canonically. The canon of scripture, the sixty-six books that make up the Bible, shape the interpretation of any single book, and of any single text within it. The canon, if you like, provides the overall God-given context in which we consider any biblical passage in any biblical book. By reading canonically, we pay careful attention to the way in which the New Testament alludes to and cites the Old Testament, and explore the way in which both Testaments contribute to the life of the church.

We also recognise the progression of the biblical story from scene to scene and book to book. To read canonically means that we note where we fit within

the narrative. The majority of us will be gentile Christians, grafted into God's people (Romans 11:11-24). As such, we are freed from the law of Israel (Galatians 5:2-6) but shaped by the 'law of Christ' (Galatians 6:2), seeking to walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-24).

READING FOR CHRIST

Finally, we read scripture as centred on Christ. Jesus read the Old Testament in such a way on the Emmaus Road (Luke 24:27), while Paul similarly sees the scriptures as finding their fulfilment in Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:11). As Martin Luther once put it, the Bible is the cradle in which Christ lies.

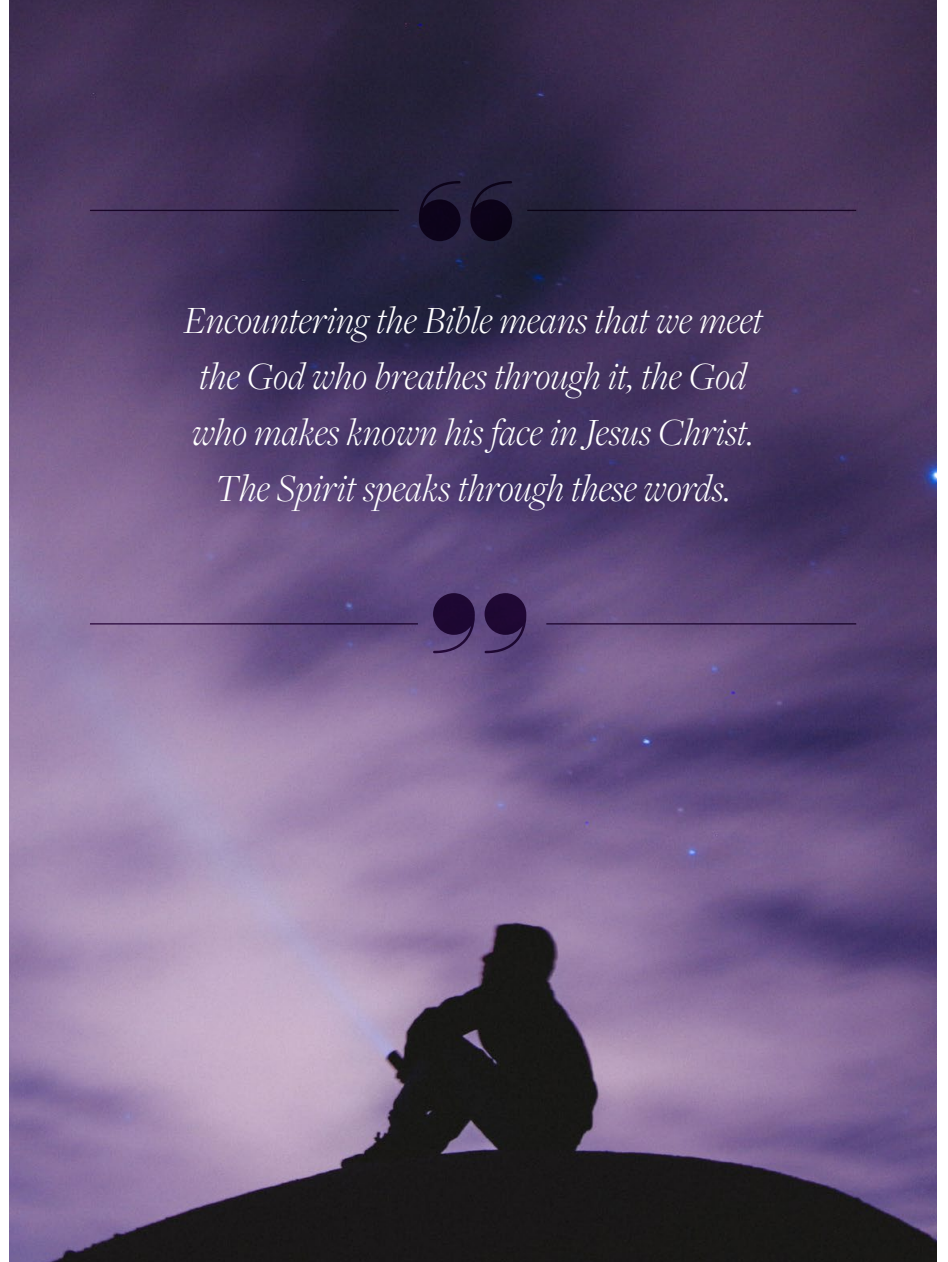
This means that in the Old Testament, we can find figures or images of Jesus, whether in the Davidic king, the high priest, or the suffering servant. Such images shape the New Testament depiction of Jesus as the climax and fulfilment of the law and the prophets. While we should first read scriptural passages in their immediate context, a Christ-centred interpretation can also be part of the interpretive process.

Since we're not the first disciples to read the scriptures, listening to other readers - past and present - can also help us to grasp more fully how the Bible reveals Jesus. Interpreting the Bible well is the call of the whole church. There is no greater task for the church than to rest under God's Word to us in scripture, guided by the Spirit into willing obedience to Christ. As we seek to read the Bible well, God meets us there. So we experience the gift and the light of his Word to us.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION / GROUP DISCUSSION

1. How have you experienced God speaking to you through scripture?
2. In what ways can you learn to listen carefully to what the scripture is saying?
3. Why is knowing the context so important in approaching scripture?
4. How does the canon guide our reading of any particular biblical book?
5. How can we read Old Testament passages in the light of Christ?
6. How can listening to others help us read scripture well?