

God At Our Side

HOW THE LIVING GOD TRANSFORMS US

PART TWO: HOW THE SPIRIT SHAPES US THROUGH SCRIPTURE

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

2 Timothy 3:14-17

THE STORIES WHICH SHAPE US

When Paul writes to Timothy:

...all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...
2 Timothy 3:16

he is writing to a young man whose mother was Jewish. Jewish people engaged with Scripture in many ways, but primarily as their story.

The Holy Spirit has worked in history to provide us with the Scriptures-God's big story. Story is how we organize and utilize information-because story shapes us.

GET SERIOUS ABOUT STORIES

Story is often relegated to the realm of fiction and entertainment in our imagination. Story is far more important and serious. Every major political regime has been a story. A story like communism takes information—the gap between rich and poor—and gives us a story to organize and utilize this information—the gap is due to the evil bourgeois who must be overthrown.

Carl Jung once said: "Once upon a time men were possessed by devils. Now they are not less obsessed by ideas."¹

Christians know the devil works, primarily, through, not just ideas, but stories. Lies are merely taking information and packaging it in a different story to change the meaning. Lies like: 'your life is hard, God must not love you. There is no point being obedient.' It is what politicians and journalists call 'the spin.'

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THE BIBLE AS GOD'S STORY

To help shape us counter to the influence of the world, the Holy Spirit has given us a story. The Bible is best seen not as a theology textbook, philosophical treatise or political manifesto, but as a story.

The Bible is the unified narrative of God's purposes, plans, and actions in history - culminating in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the inauguration of the church.

As such, the Bible becomes not just a source of information, but a way of seeing, organizing and utilizing information. As C.S. Lewis once said:

“I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”²

Seeing the Bible as such helps us avoid four major pitfalls:

Pitfall I: Favoring the Universal over the Particular

The Bible contains timeless truth universally applicable to all people. But it is also an historical document. The Spirit inspired the historical processes which brought the Scriptures about. As B.B. Warfield said of inspiration:

"If God wished to give His people a series of letters like Paul's, He prepared a Paul to write them, and the Paul He brought to the task was a Paul who spontaneously would write just such letters."³

Focusing on the timelessness of the Bible often risks us making the Bible irrelevant. Once we have the doctrine, we can get rid of the book. But, as a story, the Bible always says more than its interpretations can say. As one thinker observed:

"Words are not only containers of meaning. They do things. They wound and heal, kill and make alive. The prophets and psalmists knew that. So did Paul and the Gospel writers. They wrote to make some impact on an audience."⁴

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The Bible is a piece of history but is also, primarily, historical narrative. Not modern historical narrative either, but ancient historical narrative. Good history requires putting our questions aside and learning to ask the questions of the original audience.

Much of the time, when we are shocked, confused or repelled by the Bible, it is due to a failure to respect its historical context.

Pitfall 3: Reading the Bible in a Disjointed Way

Due to the addition of chapters and verses, not in the original manuscripts, we often read the Bible in small portions. When we do so, we miss the way the Bible interacts with and interprets itself. The way it builds on its own themes.

Consider the theme of the Wilderness. Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus all spent time in the wilderness. Jesus' time seems to develop the idea of succeeding where others failed. Jesus does not 'tempt God' in the way the Israelites did and, as such, can lead us into the promised land in the way Moses could not.⁵

Without a knowledge of the whole, we miss the meaning of the parts.

Pitfall 4: Keeping Myself Out of the Story

The theme of ‘the wilderness’ becomes not just a source of information, but a way of seeing the world. Most of the wilderness seasons are forty days or years. It’s a biblical shorthand for saying ‘for a season ordained by God’.⁶

When we see this pattern, we can give meaning to our own seasons of difficulty and darkness. God is dealing with us in the way He dealt with others in history.

The Bible is not just a story, it's our story. It becomes the way we see the world.

The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to shape us as whole persons, by shaping our mind, hearts, strength and souls.

SCRIPTURE SHAPING OUR MINDS: IDEAS & IMAGINATION

The Holy Spirit uses Scripture to shape our ideas and images. Renewing our minds is part of spiritual formation:

“Spiritual formation in Christ moves toward a total interchange of our ideas and images for his.”⁷

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Ideas are our conscious beliefs, attitudes and thoughts about life, the universe and everything.

While changing our conscious thoughts is important, we often find ourselves living and acting differently than what we consciously believe. These actions and thoughts are the realm of our imagination

Imagination is our unconscious beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts about life, the universe and everything. This is the mental map you carry concerning what the world is like. It explains why you can say God is loving, yet you can live like you don't believe it. Your imagination, your image of God has not been renewed.

A helpful question to move us towards renewing our minds in Bible reading is:

What is God revealing about reality through this text?

Two possible ways of reading for renewing the mind are:

Careful study:

Reading the Bible to understand its objective truths by finding the intended meaning for the original audience.

Careful study should be used the resources of Christian community—present, written and through tradition. It also pays careful attention to issues of historical context.

Big-Picture Reading:

Treating the Bible like a narrative—reading start to finish in large chunks to inform our imagination.

Audio Bibles are a great way to do ‘big-picture reading.’ We can also utilize resources like The Bible Project⁹ and reading guides to help us both plan our reading and organize our understanding.

SCRIPTURE SHAPING OUR HEARTS: AFFECTIONS AND DESIRES

The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to shape our affections and desires.

Stories differ from philosophical or theological treatise on another major point: emotion. Emotion is how we are all motivated. It's what makes us human. As such, a gift of our scriptures is how they are exciting, difficult and dramatic.

The Bible speaks to our hearts, not just our heads. A good question for this kind of reading is:

How is God wanting to shape my affections and desires through this text?

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In our relationships, we often tell stories of our history to strengthen our connection. In a similar way, the Bible strengthens our attachment to and desire for God through story. Two ways of reading to shape our heart are:

Memorization:

Writing the Scriptures on our hearts to reinforce our desire for God.

It is helpful to prioritize memorizing the Scriptures which create a visceral response in you. These help reinforce attachment best.

Reading our Feelings:

Camping in the Scriptures which speak to our emotional state for a season.

The Psalms are a particular treasure. In joy or darkness, there are Psalms which give voice to our feelings and lift them in worship or lament to God.

SCRIPTURE SHAPING OUR STRENGTH: ACTION

The Holy Spirit uses the Scriptures to shape our actions.

The Bible's practical advice, however, should always be kept in the context of narrative. 'Thou shalt not murder' is not just a moral imperative. It is a reminder of how people are made in God's image and only God has the power over life and death - to murder is to play God.

A good question to ask when reading this way:

**What is the living God asking me to do or not to do here?
Why is He asking this of me?**

Reading this way is less a method and more an attitude:

Active Reading:

Reading the Bible for guidance in how to live, promising ourselves to act on what we read.

Memorization:

Is a good tool to utilize here, memorizing passages which relate to particular areas of struggle.⁸ Careful study is also utilized to ensure we are really in touch with what God is commanding.

SCRIPTURE SHAPING OUR SOULS: ENCOUNTER

The Holy Spirit uses Scripture as place to facilitate and encounter with His presence.

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For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Hebrews 4:12

Whenever someone opens the Bible, God is communicating. Sometimes, however, He is communicating with us personally. We use careful study and meditation to form our theology, but God can use the Bible as a Living Word to us.

Listening is a difficult task. It often takes us years of relationship to get out of our heads and really hear the people in our lives. It is no different with God. The Scriptures ‘tune our hearts’ to hear Him properly. A good question to ask of a text towards this kind of reading is:

What is the Living God saying to me through this text, right now?

A method for reading in this way is meditation.

Meditation:

Mulling over a portion of Scripture for an extended season.

A NOTE ON SEASONS

Much of our frustration with the Bible, and our failure to engage, comes from getting stuck in a certain way of reading or interacting. Different seasons of life often require different ways of reading.

Careful study is very important in seasons when we have space and time, and especially when we are new to the faith. It helps us build a strong theological foundation.

Big-picture reading can be done when we have space in our lives, but it can also be done by listening to an audio Bible while we do dishes.

Meditation and memorization give us space to approach the Scriptures in smaller chunks—when we’re very busy with the things God has called us to. It’s a way of camping where we know we’ll meet with God.

Seasons where problems are revealed are a great time to focus on reading in an active way. Letting Scripture inform how we grow and move forward.

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WHICH STORY IS SHAPING YOU?

Whatever the way, if we want to be shaped to be like Jesus by the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures are one of the primary means He utilizes. Get this book before your eyes and in your heart.

What story is shaping you? Is it God's story?

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ENDNOTES

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5. See Matt. 4:7, Deut 6:16, Exod. 17:1–7, Num 20:1–13.
6. Four and its divisible mean 'natural perfection'—four seasons, directions and corners. Ten is divine perfection—ten commandments. See Johnson, Darrell W. (07 June 2004). *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation*. Regent College Publishing.
7. Willard, Dallas. (07 Dec 2021). *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. NavPress. pg. 102 (Ch. 7)
8. Evagrius of Ponticus (Translator, David Brakke). (01 Aug 2009). *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*. Cistercian Publications.
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**God At
HOW THE LIVING GOD TRANSFORMS US
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DISCUSSION**

Open Up:

How do you usually interact with the Bible? What are the benefits and drawbacks of your method?

Dig In:

- What metaphor do you usually use when you think of the Bible? How does it differ from seeing it as a unified historical narrative—a big story?
- If you fall into one of the four shortcomings above, which is it? Why?
- Of the methods of reading laid out—memorization, reading feelings, careful study, big-picture reading, meditation—which do you want to try?
- How are you at keeping the Bible before your eyes in this season? How can you get help making sure it stays a priority?

Prayer:

Take time to hear general requests for prayer, but also pray for the ways you've talked about keeping the Bible in front of your eyes.