

Interpreting the  
God-Breathed  
WORD

HOW TO  
READ AND STUDY  
THE BIBLE

ROBBIE F. CASTLEMAN

  
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“Were not our hearts burning within us  
while he talked with us on the road  
and opened the Scriptures to us?”  
Luke 24:32 (NIV)

for

*The Fellowship of Burning Hearts,*  
the friends, students, family, and congregations  
who have shared the journey of heartbreak,  
hope, and God’s in-breaking grace  
when he opened the Scriptures to us.

*Sola Fide, Sola Gratia, Sola Scriptura*

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# INTRODUCTION

## Scripture as the God-Breathed Word

What do Christians mean when they affirm that the Bible is the word of God? Too many Christians easily assume Scripture to be “the word of the Lord” but have never really thought about what that statement means. The Scripture of the Christian faith is composed of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. These sixty-six books form the canon, the collection of uniquely authoritative books by which all other beliefs, writings, and confessions are measured.<sup>1</sup>

The question for believers, however, is how to understand what is meant by affirming the Bible as *the word of God*. If we mean the word of the God of the Old and New Testaments, then we mean the word of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as revealed in the texts themselves. So, how are the Triune Persons involved in this word, which is Scripture, the Bible, the actual book that sits in desk drawers or on nightstands and is read every morning in a favorite chair, or in times of need, or weekly during a service of worship?

1. The word “canon” is derived from several words first used in the marketplace, meaning something straight used to measure the length or width of a product. The early church was the first to use the word in a different sense to establish a measurement by which the “rule” of faith and practice can be determined. See “canon” in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 60.

The Christian faith affirms that Scripture is “God-breathed” (from the Greek word *theopneustos*, usually translated “inspired”). Paul reminds Timothy that “all scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16). God’s word is still God-breathed. God’s word is a living word.<sup>2</sup>

### *Confidence in the Biblical Documents*

God’s word is also an objective word. Scripture is ink on paper (or pixels on a screen), and although translated from the original languages, the text is definitive. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are uniquely authoritative. Christians consider the Bible to be “the only rule of faith and practice”<sup>3</sup> for the church universal. The texts of the Old and New Testaments have been and are affirmed by the church in every cultural setting across time.

Confidence is higher for the documents themselves than for any other ancient texts. There is far more ancient documentation for the life of Jesus than there is for the life of Julius Caesar. In his classic book *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, F. F. Bruce answers the titular question affirmatively, and he robustly supports his argument with the sheer volume of complete ancient manuscripts of the New Testament—over five thousand—and tens of thousands of papyri fragments even older.<sup>4</sup> These documents, as Bruce demonstrates from his research and document work, are closer to the events they record than any other documents of antiquity. The oldest of the complete New Testament manuscripts is dated about

2. Although Scripture is God-breathed, this does not mean the Bible shares in the divine nature itself. The Bible is not the fourth person of the Trinity.

3. This phrase is common throughout church history, but its earliest rendering as translated is generally attributed to Irenaeus of Lyon (b. AD 135) in recognizing Scripture as the foundation of the “Rule of Faith,” *regula fidei* in *Epideixis* 3. However, the idea of Scripture as the foundation for faith and life is what the apostle Paul affirms in his second letter to Timothy (see 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

4. F. F. (Frederick Fyvie) Bruce (1910–90) was a distinguished biblical scholar who underscored the importance of the historical reliability of the New Testament documents and their witness to the crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus, the Christ. The summary of findings in this paragraph are based on chap. 2 of Bruce’s work, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, 6th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981).

AD 350. Bruce compares this with the nine or ten good manuscripts of Caesar's *Gallic War*, the oldest dated nine hundred years after the life of Julius, who lived from 100 to 44 BC, less than a generation from the birth of Jesus. Bruce continues with extensive comparative evidence concerning ancient documents and concludes by mentioning full books of the New Testament on papyrus fragments dated within 150 to 200 years of the original text.

The reliability of the canon documents themselves is important because the context of God's self-revelation is historical. Theologian Michael Horton highlights the importance of recognizing the historical context of everything the Bible relates as the unique record of how God chose to make himself known. Horton writes, "Everything turns on whether the reported events actually happened. *No other religion bases its entire edifice on datable facts.* The events it reports either happened or they didn't. . . . We must not miss this striking truth—that the Christian creed turns on historical events rather than eternal truths or principles."<sup>5</sup>

Concerning the recognition of the canon of Scripture by the church and the church's early affirmation of inspiration, Bruce writes, "One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired."<sup>6</sup>

The objective nature of an ancient text that is rooted in real history and clear cultural contexts makes the historical reliability of the documents themselves important. Recognizing the divine inspiration of those texts means paying close attention to the wording itself and to its historical and cultural situation as we study it. This book is designed to help students of Scripture observe the text itself and learn to research the historical and cultural background of what the text says and when the text was written. It is important to closely observe

5. Michael Horton, *Pilgrim Theology: Core Doctrines for Christian Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 45 (emphasis original).

6. Bruce, *New Testament Documents*, 22.

what the text says and then to work to understand what the text meant “then and there” in order to respond faithfully to the God-breathed word “here and now.” The God-breathed word cannot mean what it never meant, but the challenge to most readers today, especially those already familiar with the Bible, is to slow down and observe what the text itself says and how it says it. If Scripture is indeed a living, God-breathed word, it behooves us to pay attention to the text.

### *Humility and Love in the Study of Scripture*

God has spoken, and this is a risk of divine love. The weakness of the word so easily ignored or contradicted, disbelieved or manipulated for our own ends, is a risk God was willing to take. The violation of God’s word from the beginning was met with divine condescension as God revealed himself in time and space. Creation is the arena where God has made himself known to us through a people (Israel) and most fully in Jesus, the Christ.

To study Scripture is to participate in the dynamic of covenantal reality within the God-breathed word. God keeps his word. The Bible is not a lucky charm or a sanctified horoscope because God is not a vending machine, nor does God relate to humankind through a cause-and-effect relationship. The story of Scripture is a story of astounding grace. The God who spoke all of that into being as the place of his self-revelation is the God who still speaks through the record of that revelation, the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments.

The difference between the canon and a cannon is more than just an extra “n.” The latter is used to destroy and harm, to win a fight or a war, to make a show of power. But the canon of the God-breathed word is a canon of grace and truth. Good Bible study doesn’t happen if our goal is to win an argument or to find self-empowerment or self-comfort. There is a distinction between Scripture knowledge as a category on the game show *Jeopardy!* and Scripture knowledge that enables a person to embody the God-breathed word with truthfulness, wisdom, and grace. Humility is a hallmark of a disciple who studies Scripture well.

Another hallmark is the enriching reality of the community of faith gathered by the Spirit to study the God-breathed word for a lifetime. Discipline is characteristic of a disciple who wants to study Scripture well. It takes discipline and practice to do anything well. Hearing the word of the Lord means knowing the difference between playing all the right notes and making music. The music made by God's people is based on the lyrics of Scripture, whose first, last, and eternal song is a doxology of praise.

### Learning to Interpret the God-Breathed Word

This book is about taking seriously the God-breathed sense that Paul declares and that Christians affirm. It is a practical presentation of how to study Scripture, recognizing its God-breathed reality and how it is canonically integrated in the scope of its historical contexts. In addition, the robust appreciation of *speech-act* hermeneutical concerns, which view God's word as both powerful and wedded to the integrity of God's character, is of central importance. Speech-act interpretive practice recognizes that what God speaks, happens: God spoke, and a universe of time and space came into existence; with a word, Jesus calmed the wind and waves of a lake in Galilee; the Spirit breathes, and a person is "born from above" (John 3:7). Scripture can be understood as the record of what God has done, the speech-acts of the trinitarian God.

Chapter 1 describes how to observe the biblical text and highlights the common challenges for doing this well. This seems fairly simple, but it is the most difficult part of studying Scripture. Paying attention to what the text says and how the text says it is critically important. One cannot rightly interpret a passage of Scripture until close and detailed observation of the text is finished. This time-consuming process demands a discipline uncommon in the multitasking rhythm and hurried pace of the current day. This chapter also addresses how easy it is to overshadow the text with self-concerns, personal history, and other things that get in the way of observing the text clearly. If

we are to hear the word of the Lord well, the text must have our full-time attention.

Observation of the text is the mandatory first step before interpreting the text. Interpretation comes next and focuses on what the passage meant in its own historical and cultural contexts. This is followed by application of the text, a fitting response to the God-breathed word in the contemporary reality of life. Observation, interpretation, and application constitute the rhythm of study throughout this book.

Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of narrative genre in both observing and interpreting the text. God didn't reveal himself by shouting from an otherworldly distance, at least not very often. For the most part, God draws near to his people in time and space. God chose to reveal himself to Israel through his Spirit at work in prophets, kings, and common women and men, and these people are characters in the story that constitutes the biblical narrative. The truths that Scripture teaches cannot be separated from the story that Scripture tells. Recognizing narrative as the cradle of biblical truth is vitally important if the canon of Scripture is to be understood as God-breathed, a living word, a real story that tells us who God is and who we are in relationship to him and to one another. Like us, the people of God in the biblical canon have a learning curve. Their stories are often messy, and they are often misunderstood. These saints of old misunderstood God too. Knowing the whole of the narrative arc for a biblical character, time, or situation is often the key to understanding what God said and is still saying to his people.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 center on the dynamic, God-breathed word as three "voices" heard in the biblical story, the record of that story, and the reading of the story. The first voice of Scripture, described in chapter 3, is one we learn to hear only vicariously through the text. No reader "heard" the voice of God in the opening chapter of Genesis, when God said, "Let there be" (Gen. 1:3). The God who breaks into his own creation to speak and to do is a God who reveals himself, his work, and his word over a great span of time. Christians believe by faith, not by sight, what Scripture tells us happened in the great

narrative of the biblical text. It takes work to observe the details in a biblical passage that offer glimpses of the God who breathes and speaks behind the scenes of the historical event itself.

The second voice of Scripture, described in chapter 4, concerns how to hear the God-breathed word through the particularities of the text that records God's self-revelation. The vantage point of the writer through whom God breathed and the importance of what God laid on the writer's heart concerning the text's first audience is of critical concern for students of Scripture. Textual distinctions in some Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament) and in the four accounts of the Gospel in the New Testament are used to illustrate these dynamics.

The third voice of Scripture, discussed in chapter 5, concerns how we can carefully, thoughtfully, and prayerfully hear what God *is saying* through what God *has said*. A fitting response to what God's Spirit continues to breathe through the biblical word is the culmination of Bible study. Learning to act on the word that is heard, Jesus says at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, is the way to be a wise person, a person God will recognize as belonging to him when the story comes to its redemptive conclusion.

Having discussed the trinitarian shape of Scripture in chapters 3–5, we turn in chapter 6 to focus on the canonical scope of biblical hermeneutics. Thinking biblically necessitates an awareness of the whole canon. This can be quite a challenge, but the rewards are glorious. How a single passage of Scripture contributes to or reflects on the overarching biblical narrative is the first consideration. A first step is to note what comes right before and right after the passage being studied and the placement of the passage within the whole book. This is followed by consideration of the passage in light of the full revelation of God in the good news of Jesus Christ, from anticipation to incarnation. Learning how to see a passage through the arc of biblical theology from creation and fall to redemption and consummation is a worthwhile challenge for the study of Scripture. The discipline of learning to think canonically is vital to hearing the word of the Lord and not just the sound bites from the Bible that we like the most.

The conclusion of this volume challenges the reader to see Scripture as a play script full of action and characters that communicate in a way that only a story can really embody, a play that God's people are invited (and commanded!) to contribute to on the stage, which is the church's witness in our world today. We are meant to observe, interpret, and apply the God-breathed word well. We are meant to know the Playwright better. We are meant to see ourselves in myriad biblical characters who belong to us—and we to them—by faith. The church whose head is the Lord Jesus Christ is meant to embody and reenact the story of Scripture in our worship, our witness, our work, and our mission in the world. Studying the God-breathed word is a sacred task to which the church and its people must seriously attend.

# HEARING SCRIPTURE

## *What Does the Text Say and How Does It Say It?*

Hollywood films set in New York City and made from 1973 to 2001 often include panoramic views of the Manhattan skyline. The shots of the skyline are usually incidental to the story of a romance, drug dealer, or spy ring that will unfold for the moviegoer. For the movie, the city skyline, dominated by two 110-story towers, was simply meant to place the story geographically and often served only as the backdrop for introductory credits or an early scene. The towering presence of the World Trade Center towers, completed in 1973 and furnished with its own zip code, provided around ten million square feet of workspace for nearly thirty-five thousand people and, on a clear day, a forty-five-mile view of the land and sea for the seventy thousand tourists who visited daily. During the 1990s, my family and I took in the view from the dizzying top of WTC 1, the north tower. I still have a postcard of the New York City skyline from our visit there.

Now when I look at the postcard or see the skyline dominated by the twin towers in a movie, I have a hard time seeing what is there

without the jarring memory of what is no longer there. Such images now cause a twinge in my gut because of the jumble of memories from a day simply referred to as 9/11. This shorthand for the date September 11, 2001, doesn't even need to include a year to mark its significance. It's now nearly impossible to look at a postcard or a film clip of the World Trade Center prior to 9/11 and not see in the mind's eye the twin towers, a plane, and a wave of building ash flooding a street filled with people running away in terror.

One's experiences of significant events, people, places, and even certain smells create memories, both happy and sad. Seeing what is in front of us and appreciating it for its own sake is a challenge in the shadows cast by memories. The New York City skyline will be viewed through the events of 9/11 for a long time. This cognitive phenomenon is natural, but it can be unhelpful. To see a picture postcard clearly in its own light and time and place, one must set memories, assumptions, and acquired expectations aside to avoid casting a shadowy profile on what is there. The more familiar something is, the harder it is to dismiss the shadow of personal experiences and just observe what's there. This is true of written texts as well.

Learning to read Scripture every time like it is the first time is equally challenging. The discipline of stepping aside to eliminate a personal shadow is one of the first requirements to seeing Scripture clearly and paying attention to what it says. Learning to read Scripture is harder than one might think. Hearing God speak in Scripture demands attentiveness to what our eyes read. We "hear" through our eyes and therefore must pay attention to the details of a text without the echoes of the first or the last time we read the text or heard it read, preached, or taught. Scripture is God-breathed in a dynamic way: the whole of what we read—from the occurrence of the original event to the recording of that event in the biblical canon—is the work of God's Spirit. All of it is God-breathed; God spoke all of it into being. Having "ears to hear" demands the discipline of eyes that take the time to see what Scripture says and to note how

Scripture says it. This must be done well before we can ask what a particular passage meant in its original context, let alone what it means to readers today.

In this chapter, we first discuss what “God-breathed” means as Paul’s modifier for Scripture when he wrote, “all scripture is inspired [God-breathed] by God.” Then we will explore the importance of hearing God’s word well and its connection to faith and discipleship. In addition, practical help for how to go about paying close attention to what Scripture says and how it says it will be emphasized. The challenges faced in taking the time to observe a passage in great detail so that we hear the word of God well are addressed. This is followed by how we learn to hear God’s word through our eyes and the important discipline of “reading out” of a text (exegesis) and how to avoid the regrettable habit of “reading into” a text (eisegesis). The chapter will end with suggestions for practicing how to see and hear passages of Scripture well.

## Hearing the God-Breathed Word

The apostle Paul reminds his coworker Timothy that “all scripture is *inspired* by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17, emphasis added). The word “inspired” in this passage is the translation of the Greek word *theopneustos*, which is from two root words, *theos* (“God”) and *pneuma* (“wind,” “spirit,” or “breath”). This compound word in Greek is translated “God-breathed.”<sup>1</sup> New Testament scholar William D. Mounce helpfully summarizes Paul’s view: “The entirety of Scripture comes from the mouth of God. To

1. The *tos* at the end of *theopneustos* makes the term passive tense, indicating that Scripture is acted on by God. Therefore, God is the initiating source of “all scripture” (2 Tim. 3:16). Scripture is inspired or God-breathed (passive). This is distinct from the idea that Scripture is the source of God’s breath (active). The unique authority of Scripture, therefore, comes not from our understanding of or response to God’s word but from the breath of God, the Spirit of God.

read it is to hear him speak. It is therefore true, and it can therefore be trusted.”<sup>2</sup>

Reading attentively, carefully, and slowly is necessary to hear the word God speaks. To read the God-breathed word is to listen and hear through our eyes. We must pay attention to what we see if we are to hear well. The God who speaks has always spoken. The Spirit, the very breath of God, was the “wind from God” that “swept over the face of the waters” when God first spoke the universe into existence out of nothing but the power of his own word (Gen. 1:1–2). God kept speaking when he answered the virgin’s question—“How can this be?”—when told she would conceive “Jesus . . . the Son of the Most High” in her womb. Through the angelic messenger God said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” It is no wonder that Mary replied, “Let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:30–38). Similarly, the Spirit, the divine wind, the very breath of God has “overshadowed” the original people, events, history, and reality that the text of Scripture relates. The Spirit “overshadowed” the prophet or evangelist, judge or apostle, through whom the word of God was remembered and written.

Hearing the word involves paying careful attention to what the text says and how the text says it. The two questions, *What does the text say?* and *How does the text say it?* must be asked repeatedly when studying the God-breathed word. As we do so, we depend on the Holy Spirit to teach us, as the apostle Paul writes:

As it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. . . . No one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak

2. William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 570.

of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit. (1 Cor. 2:9–13)

Most assuredly, one of God’s gifts given to bless and benefit his people is Scripture.<sup>3</sup> God is still speaking through the particularity of the written text of Scripture, still breathing through the Spirit these words, this truth, his story into the lives of those who read Scripture that they might have “ears to hear” (Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35). Those “ears” that hear are disciplined by eyes that take the time to carefully see what the text says and how the text says it. This discipline, this “self-control,” is a fruit of God’s Spirit who is active, alive, and breathing his own character into the disciple’s life (Gal. 5:22–23). The Spirit’s fruit of self-control moves us out of the way and keeps us from casting the shape of our own shadow (our desires, agendas, and opinions or what we want to hear God say) onto the text of Scripture. Dependence on the Spirit of God is imperative in order to see and hear the word of the Lord clearly.

### Faith Comes by Hearing

Hearing God’s word is an idea that threads itself all the way through Scripture. God speaks, God calls, and God’s people are commanded to hear, *shema*.<sup>4</sup> The Shema in Deuteronomy 6 draws our attention to seeing, hearing, knowing, memorizing, reciting, and obeying the God-breathed word:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with

3. Paul affirms this idea when defending the “advantage” of being Jewish and gives the gift of God’s word first place because “the Jews were entrusted with the oracles [*logia*, or “the words”] of God” (Rom. 3:2).

4. In a foundational text of Jewish liturgy, Deut. 6:4 begins with the word “Hear,” the translation of the Hebrew *shema*. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 is thus known as the Shema of Israel. The Shema was and still is recited as daily prayer by many Jews, including the first disciples of the New Testament. Jesus used v. 5 of the Shema to summarize the first and greatest commandment (Mark 12:29–34; Luke 10:27–28; Matt. 22:36–38). It is no surprise that Paul associated the faith of salvation with hearing.

all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4–9)

This passage from Deuteronomy offers more than a few ideas concerning how to go about the task of exegesis, of “reading out” of a text. First, let the words, the rhythm, and the pattern settle into “your heart” (v. 6), to gain a sense of the way a text is to be read and heard. Read the passage several times out loud, in several different ways (as a command or a comfort, loudly or softly, as if to a person who is ill or to a young, energetic child) and gain a sense of how the text was meant to be heard.<sup>5</sup> Second, think through how a certain text might be read and heard in different places or times of the day (v. 7). Third, notice the order of how the text is written, the shape of a sentence, paragraph, or passage as a whole (v. 8). Think about the words that contrast in the text and note how those contrasts are connected to one another by a conjunction or other structural device. Note what words are repeated in a passage and how a repeated word connects distinctly or similarly in a sentence or paragraph or passage. Fourth, write out the passage by hand several times to help slow down and possibly note details that may have been missed when reading (v. 9). These disciplines of hearing God’s word described in this ancient text run in stark contrast to the noisy, fast-food, quick-post, brief-tweet, highly distractible world of today.

Hearing the word well also includes noticing the passage’s genre.<sup>6</sup> Is the passage a poem, a story, a teaching, a sermon, or a parable? Is the text an illustration? If so, does it reflect on the narrative before it, or does it set up the text that follows? Is the text an explanation

5. All biblical texts, like other ancient texts, were written to be read aloud due to very low literacy rates. Most scholars estimate that literacy in the first century AD was between 10 and 20 percent and mostly limited to the elite male.

6. See chap. 2 for a fuller discussion of genre.

of a different kind? Is a simile (“like” or “as”) used or does the text include a metaphor of some sort? The broader context is important as well. Always take note of what comes right before and right after the passage being studied. In a narrative text, note details that involve the five senses (hearing, tasting, seeing, smelling, and touching) for those originally present in the story. Consider everything that can be observed about the text: who, what, when, and where. But still, do not yet ask “Why?” When “why” questions arise, make a note of it, but don’t start the work of interpretation (hermeneutics) until the exegetical work is done as thoroughly as possible.

I often find it helpful to print out a passage I want to study, using wide margins and double spacing but without including verse markings or chapter breaks.<sup>7</sup> Ignoring these artificial breaks and markings can help me see the text as a whole. For instance, taking out the break between chapters 13 and 14 in the Gospel according to John makes the text much clearer than when these chapters are divided. Certainly, Peter’s heart was troubled by the warning of Jesus recorded at the end of chapter 13, but this connection is lost if the chapter break is allowed to interrupt the flow of the text as a whole. Again, Paul’s beautiful words in Philippians 4:4–9 are often artificially severed from his admonition to Euodia and Syntyche in verses 2 and 3, which serve as the immediate context for the entire passage. Paul is still addressing these coworkers in the gospel in verses 4 through 9. When read rightly, not only will the reader better hear what Paul is saying to these women but will better hear also what God, through this particular word, is still saying to disciples today who find themselves at odds over something. Not only will the student of Scripture see and hear what is there, but careful observation will also lead to a better understanding of the text in its original setting as well as a more fitting contemporary response to the passage.

7. The texts of the Hebrew Scripture (Old Testament) and the New Testament were not originally written with verse marks, chapter breaks, paragraphs, or much punctuation. These helpful marks were imposed on the text much later in order to help the precision of copying and translating the texts and to help people studying the texts to navigate them and refer to them with accuracy.

## Hard of Hearing?

The discipline of slow reading, attention to detail, and delaying interpretation of what the text says and how the text says it is hard work. Answering the “what” and “how” questions is not as easy as it seems. Exegesis takes time and practice to do well. Like the enjoyment of a gourmet meal, it is wise to take smaller bites and to enjoy chewing and tasting. “Taste and see” is the psalmist’s good advice for enjoying the goodness of the Lord (Ps. 34:8), but it is also good advice for savoring the content of Scripture. Exegetical discipline also leads to an understanding of God’s intention for his word. The student of Scripture savors the work and takes the time to “taste” the passage. It does seem that when we “hear” God’s word well, we do “taste” the Lord’s goodness. Paul adds the metaphor of “smell” in what it means to know God. “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him” (2 Cor. 2:14–15). The time needed for good Bible study yields the joy of hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling—knowing God! When we are shaped by the God-breathed word, the full-bodied aroma of Christ Jesus who is the Word of God fills the air.

God’s word is good, but it demands careful work to experience that goodness. However, at this point readers may ask, “Why should something so good for all God’s people demand such careful and time-demanding work?” As God eloquently states through the prophet Isaiah:

My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.  
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,

giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:8–11

The study of Scripture is challenging and takes time because it is meant to transform us, to accomplish something in us that God desires by the Spirit through the word. It takes work to hear the word of the Lord because it is often a word we do not want to hear. God’s word will not leave us unchallenged or unchanged. As with Isaiah, if we “taste and see” the Lord in Scripture, we might be “undone” (Isa. 6:5 KJV). The God-breathed word is commissioned by God to accomplish something in and through us. To listen, to read, to study Scripture prayerfully and carefully is difficult for mere creatures whose thoughts and ways are foreign to the perfection of God’s wisdom, love, and comprehension.

The study of Scripture is not limited to cognitive understanding. A disciple learns from God’s word how better to participate in the ongoing story of redemption. God’s purpose for the word “that goes out from [God’s] mouth” for his people is not just to learn things *about* God. What one might learn about God’s people, biblical history, propositional truth, principles of ethics, or the end of all things must always be connected to the story of divine grace within which God has revealed all things. God has revealed himself, his ways, his thoughts, his desires, and his character—and the record of this is Scripture itself. Scripture tells us who God is, who we are, what’s gone wrong in us and in the world, and how all is made right. What God has revealed, unveiled, and spoken is what we study in Scripture. Through this study, by God’s grace and Spirit, we come to know him. With this Spirit-infused, God-breathed knowledge, we begin to “taste and see” how God knows, sees, understands, shapes, challenges, and faithfully loves us. When we study Scripture, God gets our attention and draws us aside to hear him speak. Like Moses (Exod. 3:3–5)

we find ourselves on “holy ground.” It is wise to take off our shoes, draw near, and listen carefully to each and every God-breathed word.

### Using Eyes to Hear

My older son is an artist who specializes in mixed-media art for public spaces. His work fascinates me because of how he goes about reading and researching space and place for his installations. Once while I was visiting his studio, he asked me to look at a piece he had just finished. I walked around the piece, looked at it for about a minute, and noted it was made of wood and metal fixtures and was sort of shaped like a box. I then turned to him and asked, “What does it mean?” His reply was the beginning of my art education: “Now, Mama, what would you say to me if you asked me to read a passage of Scripture and I read through it one time rather casually and then asked that question?” I knew immediately that I would tell him with some fervency that this question is highly premature because he should take a good amount of time to look carefully, slowly, and repeatedly at the passage before he could ever begin to say what it meant in its first context, let alone what it means today based on that understanding. In the studio, after a knowing smile and a confession of my artistic sin, I spent a good bit of time looking at this wood and metal work of art—how it was connected, how the bolts repeated in a certain pattern over and over again. I noticed it was hard to tell what was the front or even the top of the piece, and I began to have an inkling that the ambiguity might be intentional.<sup>8</sup> My son and I ended up having a delightful conversation about how our academic disciplines have a lot in common. Both art and Scripture demand time to see what is there.

The two questions—*What does the text say?* and *How does the text say it?*—are answered by the work of exegesis. *Exegesis* is a compound word rooted in the Greek language that means “to read

8. To my delight, Dayton Castleman had created a sculpture reflecting on the perfect and interpenetrating union of the divine Trinity.

out of.” It takes time and attention to detail to read “out” what is “in” a text. The task of closely observing the text always comes before the work of dealing with the meaning of the text, the work of hermeneutics. *Hermeneutics* is the work of interpreting the text based on what the text says and how the text says it. Exegesis must come before hermeneutics. Only after a text has been observed well can one ask what the text means. The text itself, the God-breathed word, is the foundation of meaning. One bad habit that is easy to establish and hard to break is deciding what a text means before knowing in detail what a text says.

The exegesis of a passage of Scripture involves paying attention to all the details—each word, phrase, sentence, sequence, clause, verb tense, conjunction, and so on. It even involves paying attention to whether a noun or pronoun is singular or plural. Paul bases his major argument for the entire book of Galatians on the observation that the word “offspring” is singular and not plural in the biblical text. Using God’s promises to Abraham in Genesis, Paul carefully notes, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say ‘And to offsprings,’ as of many; but it says, ‘And to your offspring,’ that is, to one person, who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16). Paul was a master of exegesis. His careful attention to God’s word is why Paul was such a master theologian. If attention to detail in the text was important to Paul, it should be so for every student of the God-breathed word. Careful observation of God’s word was also why Paul was a master theologian.

### **Exegesis: Slow Reading Done Well**

Observation takes time and attention. Taking time to closely observe a text or a work of art (or a person, a flower, a mountain range, or the arrangement of food on a plate) is a countercultural discipline, but it is a needed corrective in a fast-paced culture that creates and thrives on short attention spans. If the “slow food” movement is countercultural resistance to fast food and the loss of community around

the dinner table, then the slow reading required by good exegetical “seeing” is the first step to “hearing” the God-breathed word. When God is speaking, it is good not to interrupt and prematurely ask, *What does this mean?* If, as Paul says, “Faith comes from what is heard” (Rom. 10:17), then listening through our eyes in the observation of a text is bound to nurture a disciple’s faith.

### The Danger of Eisegesis

Learning to carefully read “out of” the text (exegesis) takes time but reading “into” a text (eisegesis) comes very easily to most people. We like to hear what we want to hear and tend to see what we are looking for. Taking care to not cast a self-shaped shadow (or to project our own ideas, opinions, and context) onto the text is one of the great challenges of good exegetical practice. Such shadow-casting is hard to avoid, and often the best the reader can do is stay alert to this chronic and understandable tendency. One should try to identify the reasons why one might be prone to cast a certain shadow on a passage of Scripture. It is important to own up to all sorts of personal biases that may influence how one thinks about a text. These biases range from political ideology, theological commitments, and denominational insider language to gender, age, and personal experiences. Honestly identifying a self-shaped shadow makes it easier to bracket out the presuppositions and predispositions the reader brings to a text. Without this shadow, the text itself can be seen more clearly. Thoughtfully setting aside personal issues, denominational or theological identity, history, and experience can help to sharpen observation of what the text says. This self-awareness deepens humility before the text, which is a necessary virtue for interpreting the God-breathed word.

An example of eisegesis is the sermon that uses a passage of Scripture as a means to express the preacher’s own opinion. The sermon can become a mere therapeutic tool that the pastor uses to address a congregational need, expectation, or problem. As well-intentioned

as this may be, we must remember that the God-breathed word is meant to “accomplish [God’s purpose] and succeed in the thing for which [God] sent it” (Isa. 55:11). To treat God’s word as something to use for one’s own ends—even if that end is a sermon that meets the needs of congregants—is to treat it like a collage of the reader’s own ideas, an ink-on-paper thing to be cut up, pasted, and made to accomplish a personal agenda, however well meaning that agenda might be.

### Praxis

Observation involves asking questions about the text concerning everything but what the passage means. Observant readers ask who, what, when, and where, but not yet why. They notice the verbs, nouns, conjunctions, contrasts, repetitions, and patterns of structure. The discipline of observation is the beginning step of what is often called inductive Bible study.<sup>9</sup>

Below are several passages from distinct genres or kinds of writing (poetry, narrative, history, epistle). Use these short passages to practice the discipline of observation by seeing what the text says and how the passage is structured. Slowly read each of the following passages several times and then practice the discipline of observation by taking time to respond to the questions or directions following each passage. Bear in mind that there is much more to observe in the passage than what is given in the brief starter ideas offered below.

9. Fisherman Bible Study Guides (published by Waterbrook Press/Random House) and Lifeguide Bible Studies (published by InterVarsity) are two of the best sources that use the inductive method of study. All examples in this section are taken from a few of the guides I have written for both Waterbrook (*King David: Trusting God for a Lifetime* [2000] and *Elijah: Obedience in a Threatening World* [2001]) and InterVarsity (*Peter: Learning to Be Like Jesus* [1999] and *The Story of Scripture* [2008], a series of twelve studies covering the entire biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation). See also my book *New Testament Essentials: Father, Son, Spirit and Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014) for another example of the inductive method of Bible study: observation, interpretation, and application.

*Example 1: Psalm 32 (penitential psalm, poetry)*

- Note who the psalmist says is “happy” (NRSV) or “blessed” (NIV) in verses 1 and 2.
- Note the structure in verses that use parallel words or phrases to express a similar or identical idea. Note if the words or phrases are used to convey similarity or difference.

*Example 2: 1 Kings 18:19–40 (narrative)*

- Note where this story takes place.
- Identify the variety of people who participate in this story.
- Note how the passage summarizes the rules of the contest between the prophets. Make a list of these rules.
- Note how the prophets of Baal act and how they call on their god. Contrast this with how Elijah prepares the sacrifice, and how he calls on the Lord.
- Make a list of questions, concepts, or parts of the historical context you would want to research based on your observations of this passage.

*Example 3: Acts 15:1–12 (historical summary and teaching)*

- Make a list of the major parties and people involved in this passage.
- Note the order of speakers throughout the passage and consider how the main conflict in the text is described and addressed.
- Rewrite Peter’s argument in verses 7–11 in your own words as one way to “slow read,” to gain a sense of what the text says and how the text says what it does.

*Example 4: John 1:1–18 (prologue, epistle)*

- After reading this passage slowly several times, note the structure of the text that focuses on the Word of God and the two sections that focus on John the Baptist.

- List every statement in the text concerning “the Word.”
- Note which verses explicitly identify the Word with “the S/son” and with “Jesus.”
- Note words that are used as contrasting pairs or ideas in the passage.

### *Additional Examples*

- Select a passage of Scripture that has been meaningful to you. First, note the context for the passage—what comes immediately before and after the passage? Second, rewrite the passage in your own words without reading into the text any interpretive ideas. Third, using sentences in the text (and not necessarily verse divisions) make an exhaustive list of everything the text says. Fourth, summarize the structure of the passage noting *how* the text says what it does. Fifth, make a list of things you would want to research (words, ideas, history, culture, the original historical time and place of the event or teaching, and if known, the time and place of the written text and its first audience).
- Follow the same steps as the previous exercise, but this time select a passage that is unfamiliar to you. First, note the context for the passage—what comes immediately before and after the passage? Second, rewrite the passage in your own words without reading into the text any interpretive ideas. Third, using sentences in the text (and not necessarily verse divisions) make an exhaustive list of everything the text says. Fourth, summarize the structure of the passage noting *how* the text says what it does. Fifth, make a list of things you would want to research (words, ideas, history, culture, the original historical time and place of the event or teaching, and if known, the time and place of the written text and its first audience).