

Open Heart to Scripture

Three attitudes essential to understanding scriptural truth

By Jean Fleming

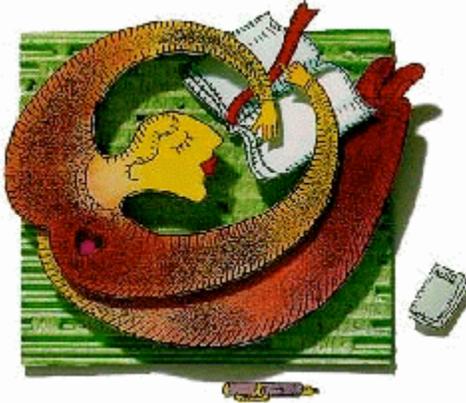


Illustration by Franklin Hammond

When we approach the Scriptures, too often we grab our tool box of the mind—the concordance, dictionary, commentary, notebook, and pens—and neglect the essential intangibles of the spirit and heart.

A curious, capable mind alone cannot invade the deep spaces of this Book. An academic approach to the Scriptures may be fascinating, but it can not take us beyond the outer husk of truth. To taste the sweet fruit within we need more than gray matter.

What intangibles of the spirit and heart do we need to bring to Bible study? If I were to choose one verse to capsule the essential attitudes I believe God looks for in His people as they approach His Word, Is. 66:2 would get my vote. “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” We don’t hear much about sticking a humble and contrite spirit and a good solid tremble in with our Bible study helps, but without them we will always shuffle around the edges and never penetrate to the heart of God’s riches.

Let’s take a look at three essential attitudes and why they are important as we come to understand the Scriptures.

A Humble Spirit

First, we need a humble spirit. A humble spirit grows in a proper understanding of who God is and who we are in relation to Him.

God looks for a particular spirit as we come to His Word precisely because it is *His Word*. The Bible is communication from the high and lofty One, the One who lives forever, whose name is holy, but who lives with the person of humble and contrite spirit (Is. 57:15). This Word is the most complete revelation given of the God who is eternal, divine, holy, and personal. God has “exalted above all things [His] name and [His] word” (Ps. 138:2). God gives His Word a place of highest honor.

When we grasp something of the reality that it is God’s Word, we realize that we cannot come to this Book on an equal footing with it. The human mind cannot fathom the thoughts, the character, the Person of God.

Jack, May, and Gail are people who approach the Scriptures with humble spirits. Jack and May, a vibrant Australian couple, had come to Christ in middle age. As new believers unfamiliar with the Bible, Jack and May felt they needed to start at the beginning and at the bottom. They bought and read a Bible written for children before progressing to an adult Bible. At conversion, Jack and May, like us, got their first really good look at who they are and, more importantly, who God is. Seeing themselves in their sinfulness and need and God in His pristine holiness left them little confidence in their own abilities to understand the thoughts of God. They would begin where babes start.

Like Jack and May, Gail came to the Scriptures with childlike humility. When I met Gail I was particularly impressed by her spiritual depth and insight. I wanted to know something of her story and what kind of spiritual help she had received. Her tale was one of ignorance, frustration, perseverance, and blessing.

Gail’s first attempt at Bible study ended in tears; she couldn’t answer any of the questions. The doors of comprehension were bolted. The windows were boarded over. Not a shred of light seeped in. She read and reread but her effort yielded nothing. Why could a more-than-reasonably-intelligent woman not understand even one question? she wondered. Her hunger and frustration drove her to call out to God, with weeping, “Please help me to

understand.” The next morning she got up to try again. This time the door gave way; the windows of her soul let in the light; the Book came alive.

Jack, May, and Gail are not models of humble spirits because they were ignorant and admitted it, but because they continued in that same spirit, aware that they don’t come to this Book as God’s equals in intellect, character, or experience.

Gail’s story seems to me a parable. God withheld from a bright woman the ability to understand the Bible so that He might implant a deeper lesson in her life. God can open or close this Book to us. An intelligent, inquiring mind is not enough. While most people do not find the Bible to be a completely closed book, Gail’s experience illustrates a spiritual truth. Even scholars remain in the outer courts, handling the outside of spiritual things, unless God admits them into the holy of holies.

God calls us to emulate this spirit of humility and hunger whether we are accomplished students or new converts. Intelligent, diligent, careful study is important, but the Bible doesn’t relinquish its bounty to high IQs and polished exploratory skills alone. While it is true that the Bible is in many ways like any other book, it is absolutely unique. This Book reveals “God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began”(1 Cor. 2:7). Wisdom that no eye has seen “but that God has revealed to us by his Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:10). Biblical truth isn’t discovered; it is revealed, interpreted, explained, taught by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God alone knows the thoughts of God (1 Cor. 2:11), and He communicates “spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Cor. 2:13) to the human spirit. The language He uses is not Greek, Hebrew, or English; it is spirit. The Holy Spirit whispers it to humble spirits. So like the psalmist, let us cry out, “Let me understand the teaching of your precepts” (Ps. 119:27). Charles Simeon (1758–1836), an English preacher who taught others how to preach, wrote, “The more lowly we are in our own eyes, the richer communications we shall receive from Him.”

A Contrite Spirit

Next we need to have a contrite spirit. A contrite spirit has an acute awareness of its failings. This awareness is accompanied by deep distress over them and gratitude that there is a place of refuge in the mercy and grace of God.

The concordance defines contrite as “smitten, maimed, dejected.” It only follows that if we get an accurate picture of ourselves in our fallen humanity and of God in the splendor of His holiness, we will be a bit bruised by the contrast. As Isaiah lamented after seeing the Lord in His glory, “Woe to me!” (Is. 6:5). But, of course, the glory of the gospels is that “the bruised reed he will not break” (Is. 42:3). Jesus doesn’t break but, rather, He blesses those who are poor in spirit and who mourn over their sin (Mt. 5:3–4). “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps. 34:18).

The Word comes in love to bruise as well as to bless. If we come to the Word as self-sufficient, self-satisfied consumers of blessing, the blessing cannot penetrate the armor of self. The Word of God must pierce our thick skins, must strike stinging blows at times, must put our hips out of joint, must hold a mirror before our faces that we might see what our sin is doing to us. The Word must wound before it binds up. Otherwise, far worse sores fester out of sight, waiting to erupt and destroy us. A contrite spirit welcomes God’s work that reveals who we really are. It limps to the throne of grace to receive the healing balm.

It is clear that God values a contrite spirit, but do we? Let me illustrate. A mature believer in the Sunday school class I attend confessed her failure to share the gospel with family on a recent trip. She said she had been unfaithful and asked us to pray for her. Her words bruised me. I, too, often lack the courage to speak the message God has entrusted to me. I was ready to stand and say so. But before I could, the class rallied to erase her discomfort. With the kindest intentions, they assured her that God had used the time and that contrition was unnecessary, even out of the question.

Just as I became aware of my sin and need when I heard her confession, my heart is made sensitive by the Scriptures as I see God’s plans, commands, and promises. But always I must be alert to the tendency to undermine or dismiss the response of contrition. This tendency makes us discriminating “partakers,” straining out anything unpalatable to us, instead of devoted servants.

Apart from the Holy Spirit’s enlightening ministry to our spirits, not merely to our minds, we will certainly accept or reject the thoughts of God according to our reasoning. We cart along to Bible study baggage of which we are barely aware. John R. W. Stott wrote, “It is essential to give up the illusion that we come to the biblical text as innocent, objective, impartial, culture-free investigators, for we are nothing of the kind.” We must face our defects—and acknowledge that we have barely begun to face them. We must acknowledge our biases and blindness—and know that we are still blind to them. We must come as open-minded and openhearted as we can—with the full realization that we are entangled in the sticky web of our humanity. And we must grieve. This is contrition.

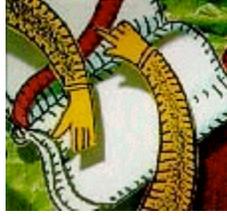


Illustration by Franklin Hammond

Trembling at His Word

God wants us to come to the Bible as those who tremble at His Word. That means we need to take God seriously and believe God is who He says He is, that He thinks and acts just as He says. Trembling at His Word is the equivalent to the “fear God” used so often throughout the Scriptures.

Years ago on an Okinawan beach, my husband and some of his friends spent the day reading together passages from the gospels that took place by the water. The day climaxed with a fish and bread dinner on the shore after they read of Jesus feeding the multitudes. As they ate, my husband noticed a man watching them from the cliffs above. Roger climbed up to talk with the man and to invite him to join them. The man turned out to be a young Marine involved in Satan worship. As they talked, Roger thought of Jesus’ encounter with the demoniac (Mk. 5:15ff.) that they had read earlier in the day. Roger extended his New Testament toward the Marine. The man began to tremble violently and ran off.

This is not the trembling that God honors; nevertheless, his trembling puts me to shame. Jas. 2:19 says, “Even the demons believe . . . and shudder.” It seems the demons in him grasped more fully than I do that this Book is alive, powerful, dangerous.

“For the word of God is living 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” (Heb. 4:12). The Bible brings me into direct contact with the clear-eyed gaze of Jesus Christ. As the demons know, this Word is not something to be trifled with.

Josiah was the kind of “trembler” God esteems. During his reign the long-neglected Book of the Law was found in the Temple. When Josiah heard the message of the book and realized the extent of the nation’s disobedience and the judgment that would surely fall on them, he tore his clothes and wept in anguish (2 Kings 22–23).

Josiah came to the scrolls with a prior commitment to obey them with all his heart and soul. He reinstated celebration of the Passover and began a vigorous campaign to rid the land of false gods. His responsiveness characterizes the man or woman who takes God’s Word seriously.

A trembling heart prepares our spirits for greater intimacy with God’s Word. As a teenager, E. Stanley Jones, a Methodist missionary to India for 50 years, would press his lips to passages that spoke to his heart. Jones’s holy kiss seems to me to express the same spirit the writer of Psalm 119 recorded: “I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches” (v. 14), “Your statutes are my delight” (v. 24), “How sweet are your words to my taste” (v. 103), “My heart trembles at your word” (v. 161).

When we take God’s Word seriously, our hands hover over our Bibles in anticipation. God said His Word is the necessary bread that will satisfy (Is. 55:1–3, Mt. 4:4). It is like snow and rain that comes from heavenly realms to the earth for a purpose. God’s Word comes to nourish and refresh, to make fruitful and effective. The Bible is not ineffectual; we can expect something to happen when we receive God’s message to us (Is. 55:10–11).

A spirit of anticipation banishes a blasé approach to Scripture. A trembling heart does not tolerate the thought that it is okay for “mature” believers past the first flushed excitement of life in Christ to stifle their yawns. Before you open your Bible, stop! Reflect. Kneel. Pray. This book is spirit, and you need the indwelling Spirit working in your spirit to receive spiritual truth. The Author of this book is your Interpreter. Who else knows the deep things of God except the Spirit of God? He comes to read to your spirit the language of Your Father. The translation you need is something more than Greek or English. The Spirit works both to bruise and soften your spirit and then to unfold the mysteries of God to you when you can receive them. Be alert to your spirit because it is a Book interpreted Spirit to spirit.¹

¹Mayberry, Peter, *Discipleship Journal, Issue 89*, (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress) c2000.