

## Reading with the Heart

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.

—Ephesians 1:17–18

There is a vast difference between reading the surface of the biblical text and encountering the God who divinely superintended its delivery into our hands—the God who proclaims to you and to me, “I am *with* you . . . will you be *with* Me?” A story in the Gospel of John offers a marvelous way to depict the difference between these two approaches to Scripture.

The narrative places us just outside Jerusalem’s city walls “early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark,” with Mary Magdalene at the tomb where Jesus was buried (see John 20:1–18). Shocked to see the boulder pushed aside from the tomb’s entrance and the body missing, Mary rushes to alert Peter and John. All three run back to the tomb together. After examining the contents of the tomb—neatly folded death cloths

punctuating the body's disappearance—the male disciples “believe” and return home. Still agonizing, Mary stays behind.

We don't know why these early witnesses responded so differently to what they saw—was it a gender issue? Peter and John had new information, and they acted on it. Mary, longing for encounter, remained distraught. When two angels appear and ask why she is weeping, Mary does not recognize them as supernatural visitors, even though the text suggests their clothing was unusual. Through her curtain of tears, Mary simply repeats the same stunning news she had given Peter and John: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Mary turns around and sees a man standing nearby, mistaking him for the gardener. “Why are you weeping, and whom are you looking for?” he asks. She begs him to tell her if he had moved the body. Her heartbreak turns to joyful astonishment when the risen Christ reveals himself to her with one word: “*Mary.*”

The Gospel account does not indicate why Mary didn't immediately recognize Jesus. In several of Jesus' post-resurrection visits, the disciples he visits appear to have been prevented from identifying him until a particular moment of revelation—a miraculous catch of fish after a long, fruitless night when a “stranger” tells them to lower their nets once more; a mealtime moment when a “stranger” takes bread in his hands and breaks it . . . and the moment when a “stranger” speaks Mary's name.

Reading Scripture with human “eyes” alone is like mentally registering the words of the text without recognizing who is speaking through them. This is why Paul speaks of “the eyes of your heart” through which we acquire experiential knowledge of God

(Eph. 1:17–18). Jesus promises that the Father will send in his name the Holy Spirit, our “Advocate,” who would guide us into all truth (John 14:26). Just as Mary recognizes Jesus when he spoke her name, so we can expect to recognize the voice of God speaking personally to us in the inner sanctuary of our waiting hearts.

### ALLOWING THE SPIRIT TO GUIDE US

The simplest place to start in reading with the heart is by inviting the Spirit of Christ to be our guide. Whether we sit down to read just a few verses, a psalm, or an entire book of the Bible, we prepare the eyes of our heart by praying with the hymn writer:

O send Thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me,  
That He may touch my eyes and make me see;  
Show me the truth concealed within Thy word,  
For in Thy book revealed I see Thee, Lord.<sup>6</sup>

It may sound easy to “allow the Spirit to guide us” while reading the Bible—and, indeed, it is neither difficult nor burdensome—but in a culture of consumerized Christianity it is also easy to stumble over preconceived notions about the Bible cluttering the path.

Chief among such market-driven notions is that the Bible exists to serve our needs. It is no surprise that in a consumer-driven culture we would be tempted to reduce the Bible to a product for self-improvement. But to do so is deadly.

Seeking reassurance that our lives will be safe and comfortable, we pull verses out of context and create Bible promise books

listed piecemeal and arranged thematically by need. It is not wrong to hope for safety and for comfort, but that is not where we will find meaning for our lives.

In our desire for a packaged, user-friendly, “just tell me what to do” life of faith, we distort the Bible into an owners’ manual for successful living. Or even moral living: then we can judge ourselves superior to others if we follow the rules more faithfully than they. It is not wrong to strive for a moral life, but if that is our only goal, it will steer us toward the righteousness of the Pharisees and not into the fullness of life with God. There is a reason why Paul counseled the Philippians, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12). God is concerned with the process of our growth, not in our human estimation of how well we accomplish it. Moralism flattens life with God by draining off the dimension of relationship. After all, it is much easier to follow a to-do list than to engage in the messy business of personal relations. Again, God is saying, “I am with you—will you be with Me?”

We misconstrue reading and studying the Bible as acts of self-improvement by using them as props to make us feel good about ourselves as religiously devout. You see, we can feel better about ourselves if we can point to things we are “doing for God.”

All these Bible-related activities may give us some temporary satisfaction, the way eating sweets may fleetingly gratify a sweet tooth. But just as a pastry is no substitute for solid life-giving food, so using the Bible to serve our needs will leave untouched the deepest longings of our soul. Staying immersed in the Bible can keep us on course on our spiritual path. However, it is entirely possible for us to immerse ourselves in regular routines of spiritual practice without ever becoming more loving people.

The difference lies in our willingness to relinquish all attempts to control and manipulate the written word through submission to the transforming activity of the living Word. As Paul counseled Timothy:

Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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. 3:14–17)

In a culture that places such a high premium on accomplishment, it is tempting for us to amass biblical skills in order to impress others with the knowledge and insight we presume to have gained through reading, studying, or memorizing the Bible. But the Bible itself undercuts such posturing. One of the central themes in the story of God's people is the stubbornness with which they cling to religious performance instead of clinging to God. In the second chapter of his thundering letter to the Romans, Paul goes straight for the jugular of religious hypocrisy—"[you] boast of your relation to God and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law." Religiosity corrodes the soul and bars the door to faith: "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (2:17–18, 24). We exploit the Bible to call down judgment on others instead of allowing the Bible to judge the content of our

own hearts. God is in relentless pursuit of the content of our hearts: “a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God” (2:29).

The Bible is not a tool for sharpening our religious competence, but a living and active sword for cleaving our double-minded thoughts and motives, exposing and transforming the contents of our hearts (see Heb. 4:12). The best guard against any handling of the Scripture that leaves our souls untouched—and ourselves unchanged—is surrender to the cleansing, forming flow of the Holy Spirit. Simply, this means opening our whole selves—mind, body, spirit; thoughts, behavior, will—to the open page before us. We seek far more than familiarity with the text alone; instead we are focusing our attention through and beyond the text to the God whose reality fills its depths.

### EXPERIENCING *LECTIO DIVINA*

Distinct from other ways of approaching the Bible, the ancient Christian practice of *lectio divina* (spiritual reading) is the primary mode of reading the Bible for transformation. There is a place for reading large portions of the Bible in one sitting, such as an entire book, but this is not it. Here we are concerned with depth rather than breadth. There is also a place for Bible study, in which we apply exegetical tools of interpretation, but this is not “study” per se. Rather, *lectio* is a way of allowing the mind to “descend” into the heart, so that both mind and heart might be drawn into the love and goodness of God. Our goal is immersion. We are shaped by the environment in which we live and breathe and interact.

Lectio immerses us in the deep and timeless waters of God, that more of God's eternal life might flow into our time-bound lives.

In its classic form, lectio comprises four elements, although there are many variations on them with different wording and emphasis: *lectio* (reading with a listening spirit), *meditatio* (reflecting on what we are "hearing"), *oratio* (praying in response to this hearing), and *contemplatio* (contemplating what we will carry forward into our lives). For our purposes here, we will refer to these basic elements of lectio as *listening*, *reflecting*, *praying*, and *obeying*. When these elements are combined—regardless of sequence, for they overlap and intermingle in a circular rather than a linear way—they lead the human spirit into a dynamic interaction with the Holy Spirit.

Although lectio is central to the practice of spiritual retreat, it is by no means limited to those special times and places. You can avail yourself of this practice amid your ordinary routines, whenever you take time out to refresh your soul with a dip in the waters of God's life.

First, choose a text of Scripture, preferably a short passage or story—long enough to let your thoughts spread out but short enough to cover thoroughly in the amount of time you have. You might identify this selected text from an assignment in a Bible-reading plan or church lectionary,<sup>7</sup> a sermon text from a worship service, a Bible story or character you feel drawn toward, or a passage suggested to you by a spiritual mentor or in a devotional book you are currently reading. In addition to your Bible, be sure to have a pen or pencil and paper alongside.

Next, find a quiet place where you can read undisturbed. If you do not already have places of solitude built into your routines, and

neither your home nor work space is conducive, be creative—park your car in a corner of an empty lot; pull off at a scenic overlook; find a small table in a coffee shop. Turn off your phone, close your daily planner, put anything distracting out of eyesight, and place yourself physically and mentally in a posture of listening, of receiving. Still yourself within by breathing deeply, quieting the clamor of demands and distractions. Do not rush this part. Inward stillness is as important to spiritual reading as muscle-stretching is to a workout. Even the busiest among us can bracket our reading in this way. You might be surprised how long a mere sixty seconds of silent, prayerful breathing can feel when it wheels to a halt the grinding momentum of a hectic day. Consider how many times throughout the day you fritter away a minute on something inconsequential, with nothing to show for it. Then notice how you feel after sixty seconds of stilling your soul before God. Once you taste it, you will find yourself longing for it more and more.

As you ease into silence, allow the Holy Spirit to ease your spirit into a repose of divine expectancy, hushed and ready to listen. Breathe a quiet prayer of preparation, with or without words. Now you are ready to cross the threshold of “ordinary” life into pure and concentrated life with God.

### Listening

Henri Nouwen once directed my attention to a lovely picture hanging in his apartment and said simply, “That is *lectio divina*.” The painting depicted a woman with an open Bible in her lap, but her gaze was lifted upward. You understand, I am sure. We

are coming to the text and seeing through the text, even beyond the text, to the Lord of the text.

We may begin by reading the passage all the way through without pausing. We are simply taking in what we read in an attitude of expectancy, as the woman in Nouwen's picture, fixing our gaze upward. All the while, we are listening for the heart of the Holy Spirit beating within our own hearts. Reading with the eyes of the heart.

After an initial reading, it is helpful to read again, slowly, this time pausing to highlight or underline any word or phrase that seems to lift itself to our attention. We have no need to struggle, trying to second-guess what God wants to teach us. We do not have to be anxious, wondering if God will bring anything or nothing to our attention. This is a time to lean into the Holy Spirit, trusting in God, wonderfully cut loose from our own internal agendas, glad in the knowledge that "the LORD is near to all who call on him" (Ps. 145:18). Through the text of Scripture, God is saying, "I am with you—will you be with Me?"

### Reflecting

We come to the Scriptures predisposed to understanding them based upon our surface contexts of familiarity. This is why it is so important to breathe a prayer for the Spirit's immersing of our mind and heart into the Life of God in our reading. God can speak to us through a passage we previously overlooked, or through a familiar passage in a way we have never seen before, because our ears are prepared to hear it in a new and deeper way.

After listening, we quietly turn to reflecting, going back over the portions of the text we marked as significant, this time seeking just a single phrase or insight that is God's word to us in this time. For example, suppose we are reflecting on the risen Christ's appearance to Mary, and we have been drawn to the one word that changes her ability to see Jesus: the sound of him speaking her name. Our concern is not with the theological implications of this appearance, nor with the physics of Christ's resurrection body, nor with the meaning for the Church that Jesus broke cultural conventions in making his first appearance to a woman rather than to a man. Rather, our goal is imaginatively to take Mary's place. Ignatius of Loyola encourages us to apply all our senses to the task: Is the sky beginning to lighten? Is the air cool to the touch, and fragrant with the aroma of plants and flowers? Are the tears drying yet on our cheeks? What does "the stranger" look like before we recognize him? How do we feel physically when we hear the sound of his voice? What does our own name sound like on his lips? How would we describe the feelings now surging through us as we realize it is Jesus?

As our minds are working through such details, our spirits are alert to what, if any, connections the Spirit may be revealing between this passage and the particulars of our own lives. Inwardly we are asking, *How are you revealing yourself to me, Lord? What am I to see and understand in this border territory where my life merges with yours?* Listening in this way requires only our attention and our desire.

Swimmers know the sensation of slipping completely underwater and feeling their ears fill up as noises above the water become muffled and distant, while the sense of hearing takes on

an unnatural clarity and immediacy. Sound travels through water four times as quickly as through the air, but the human ear is no longer able to detect where the sounds are coming from. The outer ear can identify direction only in air, so in water the only way sound is conducted is to the inner ear through the bones of the skull, which makes it seem as if the sound originates inside our own head. In the ocean, we could be startled by the clicks of dolphins who sound as if they have swum up alongside us when in actuality they are too far away for us to see. Our hearing is configured to make sense of the sounds based upon another context entirely.

During reflection and meditation, we are floating on the depths of God, held safely in the waters of his loving presence. This is the moment in lectio when “deep calls to deep” (Ps. 42:7). Like the joyful awareness of a loved one whispering softly into our ears, we become aware of the intimately personal voice of God. We cannot pinpoint where it is coming from because suddenly it is *within* us, sounding with a heightened clarity and immediacy, reverberating in the chambers of our heart. We know without a doubt who is speaking to us. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and his sheep know his voice.

Lectio is a powerful answer to the psalmist’s lonely cry, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Ps. 42:2). This is the deep connection we long for but rarely receive in a Christianized subculture where, too often, talking about experiencing God substitutes for actual experience of God.

Meditating on what we hear is like taking the first bite of a tantalizing food we have been looking forward to all day. We

chew slowly, savoring its taste and texture. We swallow gratefully, aware of how it makes its way down to sit comfortably in our stomach, quieting the pangs of hunger with the assurance that our need is being met. We repeat this over and over, allowing this word or phrase to sink down into us as it spreads throughout blood and muscle into the bones, imprinting itself upon us in a powerful and transforming way.

### Praying

Reflection so fills us that we naturally spill over into communion with God. We want to turn to the Lover who is whispering in our ear and look in the divine face, trace with our fingertips the beloved features while speaking softly in return, and rejoice to see ourselves reflected in Jesus' gaze and feel our very existence affirmed by his intimate awareness of us. We long to exclaim with Mary, *Rabboni!*

We are now moving into a third element of lectio—prayer. We engage with what we are hearing by *praying* this text of Scripture, letting the reality of this holy moment with God give rise to our heart cry of gratitude, confession, lament, relief, or praise. As we complete the circle of listening and speaking, we know that this written word of God to all people has become the living word of God to us personally. Now is the time to rest simply and deeply on the currents of prayer, allowing the Spirit to carry our spirit back to the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

## Obeying

The change that God is working deep into our souls will naturally flow outward into our lives, as surely as a river must follow its course to the open sea. In this remaining element of *lectio divina*, we contemplate the meaning of this word from God for the choices we will make this day, for the attitudes we will carry into our tasks, for the thoughts we will allow to dwell uppermost in our minds.

Now is the time to seek divine wisdom for carrying this precious gift into the flow of our life with God as it spills over into our life in the world—relationships with loved ones, interaction with friends, chance encounters with acquaintances, crossed paths with strangers. For example, we may find that the tenderness of Christ's word to Mary urges us to do a double take in offering a kind word of attention to those we might have overlooked, even to merely speak their name. We may feel so strengthened by God's awareness of us that we seek out a loved one to make sure that he or she is aware of our love and gratitude. The depth at which we have been touched gives us a fresh ability to see our circumstances in the light of what truly matters and attend to that, rather than allow ourselves to be pulled off center by peripheral distractions or false urgencies.

This process is sometimes called *application*. But there is a danger here. Application is often unfortunately reduced to steps on a to-do list in the latest program for spiritual self-improvement. Action steps may be good and helpful. But all too often they are used as a screen for resisting the actual work of spending time in the loving presence of God and surrendering to the deep inner

change that is not so easily managed in controllable steps. Here again, when seeking the response of obedience, instead of working ourselves up into anxiety over “now what?” questions, we simply and quietly rely on the Spirit’s lead.

The transformational power of *lectio divina* is on brilliant display in the life of a young man in northern Africa in the fourth century A.D. An earnest scholar in search of the good, the true, and the beautiful, Aurelius was living a deeply conflicted existence—devouring books by day and women by night. This double-minded collision of passions, aspiring to the highest while sinking to the lowest, drove him to a desperate search for resolution. One day he retreated to a small garden, tearing his hair out over the tumult in his heart:

Then a huge storm rose up within me bringing with it a huge downpour of tears. . . . Suddenly a voice reaches my ears from a nearby house. It is the voice of a boy or a girl (I don’t know which) and in a kind of singsong the words are constantly repeated: “Take it and read it. Take it and read it.” At once my face changed, and I began to think carefully of whether the singing of words like these came into any kind of game which children play, and I could not remember that I had ever heard anything like it before. I checked the force of my tears and rose to my feet, being quite certain that I must interpret this as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first passage which I should come upon. . . . I snatched up the book, opened it, and read in silence the passage upon which my eyes first fell: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wanton-

ness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in concupiscence.” I had no wish to read further; there was no need to. For immediately [when] I had reached the end of this sentence it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away.<sup>8</sup>

Doubtless you have recognized this well-known event from the life of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo and formative theologian in Christian history. It is a dramatic instance of the power with which God can speak to us through Scripture, catching us up into a deeper life with God and redirecting the course of our lives.

Do you see how “obedience” occurred here? Augustine did not whip out Paul’s letter to the Romans, read through a portion of it quickly to check off his Scripture quotient for the day, and choose an application step, gritting his teeth while vowing, “I will *not* sleep with my girlfriend tonight.” No, he was in earnest to hear a saving word from God for the sake of his life. As he responded to the urgent call to pick up the Bible and read, he opened himself to the flow of God’s Spirit into his mind and heart and soul.

Now, we must not think that this story means that *lectio divina* always yields a life-shaking experience—but we may be sure of our continual need for life-changing encounters with God. Each and every day, whether we are pacing like a caged animal in desperation or yawning over a cup of coffee in a morning lull, there are high stakes involved in how we approach the Scripture.

Always, we are answering the question in one direction or the other: will we live with God, or without God? Ours is a with-God life and we must choose: God is with us—will we be with God?

Remember, even the slightest shift of our heart in obedience to the “still, small voice” of God can be just as radical as Augustine’s conversion in its power to reshape us into the likeness of Christ. This transforming dynamic of God’s Word is a sure promise to us:

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. (Isa. 55:10–11)

### READING WITH BOTH HEART AND MIND

When a member of the religious establishment asked Jesus to name the greatest commandment among the hundreds upon hundreds in the Jewish Law, Jesus responded. “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment” (Matt. 22:37).

When we come to the Bible with the mind only and not the heart, we separate the written word from the revealed Word—

Jesus Christ. This is the failure of biblicism, a form of faith in the Bible alone that leads to dangerous and harsh consequences. It is also the failure of radical secularism, a willful refusal to bracket out presuppositions and engage the Bible on its own terms. God will not serve our favorite orthodoxy. When we continually attempt to make the Bible serve our own agendas—and in doing so, distance ourselves from God—*lectio divina* is a way of recovering our ability to be attentive to the heart of God in the Word of God.

However, approaching the Bible with the eyes of our heart without our presence of mind will clutter the path with needless misunderstanding. Bringing our cognitive understanding to the revelation of Scripture is a way of obeying the greatest commandment to love God with all our heart and soul and mind. It would be presumptuous to assume that we can discern “what the Bible is saying” entirely on our own. We need a balanced approach to our intake of Scripture: heart, soul, mind.

One helpful way to describe this balance is with the theological formulation of the “Wesleyan quadrilateral” of Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.<sup>9</sup> The next two chapters will offer specific ways of reading the Bible with the mind and in the context of the People of God—reason and tradition. Remember, always the goal is entering the transforming presence of Christ: “Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord; my spirit pants for Thee, O living Word.”<sup>10</sup>