

Jesus Opens the Scriptures

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1 Corinthians 2:6-13 NIV

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" - but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

Luke 24:28-45 NIV

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45).

Union Congregational Church calls itself "a Bible centered ministry," and our signboard out in front proclaims to our neighborhood that we're its "friendly Bible church." What the Bible says is important to us. The Scriptures are the basis for our statement of faith. Today we began a new adult Sunday school class, "What a Christian Believes," that explores the biblical foundation for our faith. It's because this congregation wants to hold to a biblical standard that its history includes separation from a denomination that seemed to be slipping from that standard in some important areas. And it's because of our concern for Scriptural truth that we're now part of the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference. As the president of our Conference, the Rev. Nicholas Granitsas, writes in the preface to our 2004 *Yearbook*:

We are united in our belief that the Bible is the only inspired, infallible, authoritative Word of God written (II Timothy 3:16-17). We seek to conform our lives and our churches to its truth.

All of that is wonderful. However, I think none of us would want to claim that our belief in the authority of Scripture warrants that we'll always understand what it's really saying to us. And I suspect none of us would say that an accurate knowledge of the Bible's contents, alone, is enough to guarantee that we'll live in conformity with the principles of the Word of God.

In other words, we may say that we believe the Bible's teachings, but we may not be very much aware of what kind of teaching the Bible contains. It's easy to have a superficial knowledge of Scripture — a verse here, a verse there, a few favorite passages we turn to again and again. While we put the Bible on a

pedestal, we may have only the vaguest notion of what John Wesley called “the whole scope and tenor of Scripture,” the overarching themes that unite all parts of the Bible and give it its continuity as a revelation of the mind of God.

And, even if we do have a good academic knowledge of the Bible’s contents, that doesn’t mean we always take it seriously as our guide for life and conduct and our window into truth. If we’re really honest about it, we might discover that other sources trump the Scriptures as the authority that controls our thoughts and actions. Perhaps it’s what the media are telling us, whether overtly or by a subtle manipulation of our perspective on the world. Perhaps we’re governed by our feelings or emotions, which lead us in a direction that’s inconsistent with God’s Word. Perhaps we’ve grown up with, or fallen into, a certain system of interpreting the Bible that tries to cross all the t’s and dot all the i’s and keeps us from hearing what the Bible itself has to say. Perhaps traditional beliefs about the Christian faith blind us to the plain word of the biblical text. I once heard a good Christian woman say, “I don’t care what the Bible says, that’s what I’ve always believed.” Obviously, she didn’t hear what she was saying, but she was unconsciously voicing an attitude that’s all too common.

But a better knowledge of the Bible doesn’t automatically make it our source of authority for understanding what’s really true about life, and how we need to live that life. I can only give myself as an example. I grew up in a liberal denominational environment, where we looked down upon “fundamentalists” as ignorant antiquarians who were bound to die out. The Bible wasn’t our source of truth. Modern science and rational thought were the arbiters of what was “really real.” In that environment, of course, I wasn’t a believer. I had no personal faith in Christ, and perhaps not even any real belief in God. I entered the ministry, but not because of a “call” — after all, I didn’t know there was anybody there to call me! I studied for the ministry, and for college teaching of religion, because my Dad was a minister and college professor and I was too insecure to risk trying some other profession I hadn’t seen modeled for me. For some odd reason — and now I see it as divine Providence — I decided to take a Ph.D. in biblical studies, and wrote a 316-page dissertation in the field of Old Testament theology, full of Hebrew and Greek quotes and citing scores of scholarly works. So I thought I had a pretty good understanding of the Bible’s contents.

But none of that brought me to a knowledge of the Lord, or made me a better person. I persisted in my dysfunctional relationship patterns. I was defensive and self-justifying, virtually without any Christian graces. I had fights with parishioners and churches, was fired from teaching positions, and went through a divorce. While, in a sense, I had an *understanding* of the Scriptures, I wasn’t *standing under* the Scriptures. I wasn’t in submission to them. The Bible wasn’t really an open book for me, because it wasn’t touching my life in a significant way — a way that could make a difference in my relationships with others and my view of myself. Something, or Someone, was missing from the picture.

And, of course, that Someone was Jesus. When, at a certain point, I came to the end of myself and committed my life to Christ — that was thirty years ago — at that point the Bible began to be more than a piece of ancient religious literature, or even a treasure-trove of theological proof texts. It began to become a guide to how I ought to understand my world, how I ought to live, how I ought to relate to other people. A process was set in motion that’s still going on with me. And it began when I met Jesus, and “he opened my mind so I could understand the Scriptures.”

You see, the Bible itself has no power to instruct and influence us until we meet the Word behind the words. Thousands of college and university students take classes in the Old or New Testament, and it doesn’t change them. I taught such classes myself in my pre-Christian days, and they changed neither me nor my students — because Jesus wasn’t in this, nor was his Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul reminds us, in the Epistle that was read this morning, that what we truly know about where God wants to take us doesn’t come from sight or hearing, or academic study, or reasoning about it. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ — but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). The Spirit of the risen Lord, the life of God in our souls, is what reveals the truth of God’s Word. Through study and scholarship we may *understand* the Bible and have accurate knowledge of what it says. But only when we’re touched by the Spirit of Christ do we begin to *stand under* the Word, so that it comes to shape our perspective on the universe and our outlook on life.

So it was that, though I could teach courses on the Bible and write scholarly, heavily footnoted papers on the Bible, I had to meet Jesus before the Scriptures really opened up to me. Jesus' disciples had a similar experience. They knew their Scriptures — the Hebrew Old Testament, the books of the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms and other Writings — because, as good Jews, they had heard them read from childhood. But they didn't see where God was leading them through the Scriptures. When Jesus died on the cross, they thought it was the end. Luke tells the story in chapter 24 of his Gospel. The women reported to the disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead, but they didn't believe them. That evening, two of them left Jerusalem, their hearts heavy with grief and disappointment, and went out toward the village of Emmaus. As they walked, a Stranger fell in with them, asking what they were talking about, perhaps why they seemed so downcast. "Haven't you heard about Jesus?" they asked. "He was a great prophet, and we thought he would be the one to bring our people back to the Lord. But the authorities condemned him to death and crucified him. Now some women claim they saw him alive again, but we think they don't know what they're talking about. We don't know what to make of it."

"Don't you believe the prophets?" asked the Stranger. "Don't you understand that the Messiah had to suffer and die, in order to be glorified?" And, says Luke, the Stranger began to show them a new way of looking at the Scriptures, explaining how they spoke of the Christ and his path of suffering — a truth that had been there all along, but which had been hidden from their understanding. The truth began to dawn then upon these dispirited disciples as the Stranger spoke to them — later on, they said, "Didn't our hearts burn while he explained the Scriptures to us?" — but they understood fully only when they shared their evening meal with him. Then, when the Stranger blessed the bread and gave it to them, they knew who he was — the risen Christ — and the true meaning of the Scriptures opened up for them. The *living Word*, the incarnate Word, made the *words of the text* live for them. They had known the Bible as history from the past. But when "he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures," the Bible's story became a story not for yesterday but for today.

Will the Bible remain for us a book of yesterday, or will it become a book of today? Will it be what it has become in so many churches — a museum piece, an antiquarian document, a historical treasure, a lovely decoration sitting in the center of our altar? Will it be only a dead text, cited in footnotes bolstering humanly designed statements of faith and doctrine? Will it be an arsenal supplying ammunition for theological warfare between opposing camps of Christian theologians? Or will it live in the life of Christ's church, and in your life and mine, as it shapes our perspective on the world and makes our *today's* what they are?

And will we continue to see in Scripture the same things we've always seen, the issues over which yesterday's battles were fought? Or will truths open up for today, truths that have always been there, but to which our eyes and hearts have been closed for so long? Let me give you three examples of this.

First, we all know that salvation comes through our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But there's *another dimension* to salvation that's written large on the pages of the New Testament, one we don't talk about much. Nobody is a Christian by himself in the New Testament. It's never a "me and God" thing. It's always a "one another" thing, it's always being part of something *more than myself* — a community of faith and concern. "Bear one another's burdens," writes the apostle Paul, "and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). And John writes, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 3:14). Statements like these open up to us another aspect of salvation. They show us how important *the church* is in God's plan for us. They show us how important it is to be part of the family of God, the people he has called to himself. They show us the *covenant* we make with one another and with the Lord, who declares, "I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). When the Scriptures open up to us, we see this dimension of salvation we might have missed. Our personal relationship with Christ is strengthened through the encouragement and support of our family of believers.

Second, a new understanding of the meaning of the cross might open up to us. We've all learned that on the cross Jesus paid the price to ransom us, and satisfied the wrath of a God who must condemn us for our sin. But when the Scriptures are opened to us, we see another dimension to the cross. In Colossians 2:13-15, Paul writes, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to

the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” Seen from this angle, Jesus’ death is something other than a price paid to the devil or the propitiation of a wrathful deity. It’s Jesus’ *victory* over the powers of evil, in which he *cancels their accusations* against us. In bearing the curse that sanctions the old covenant, Paul says, Christ sets us free from bondage to a false value system (Galatians 3:13). How people need to hear that message today — that we no longer have to prove we have a right to exist by meeting the impossible expectations of our performance-driven culture, but through the cross of Christ we’re free to live as welcomed and accepted children of our heavenly Father.

Third, when Jesus opens our minds to the Scriptures we see another dimension for today that we may have overlooked yesterday. With all the stress on doctrine over the last several centuries in Protestantism, and with all the emphasis on how the individual needs to deal with God with respect to the state of his soul and his eternal destiny, the dimension of *corporate worship* has been overlooked. But if you take a hard look at the Bible and what it’s really concerned about, you find worship from beginning to end. The Bible is a book *for* worship, and a book *about* worship. Even the opening chapters of Genesis, the story of creation, are about worship, for they’re in the form of a litany, an act of worship with a repeated refrain, something like a responsive reading: “And there was evening and there was morning . . . and God saw that it was good.” At the other end of the Bible, the Revelation to John is full of worship. The four living creatures sing the praises and worth of the “Lamb who was slain,” and their worship is echoed by twenty-four elders representing the people of God. It expands to include God’s entire “kingdom of priests,” a multitude “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9-10), then the host of heaven, then “every creature.” On the Bible’s final pages we see God’s people dwelling in the New Jerusalem, which has no temple “for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Revelation 21:22). The Bible is a book of worship. Recall that for centuries the Bible wasn’t printed; it was spoken or sung in the gathering of the Lord’s people. It’s intended to be *voiced* and heard, not just studied in silence, and that’s why I like to have a lot of Scripture read during our worship time.

These are only a few examples of how our minds might be opened to a renewed understanding of the Word for today. And I think this comes about through the work of the Spirit of the risen Christ. As happened for the disciples of old, the Scriptures break out of the mold we’ve cast for them when Jesus opens our minds to their fuller meaning. And how are we going to meet Jesus so that he opens the Scriptures to us? Our Gospel lesson shows one way this happens — for the two disciples knew Jesus in the breaking of the bread, and in this act their eyes were opened. They saw the risen Lord, and in meeting him they also saw the truth of Scripture for *their* today. As we gather about this holy table to share in the Lord’s Supper, and to make covenant with one another and with the Lord, may our eyes be opened as were those of the disciples on the Emmaus road, and the Eleven and the others in Jerusalem. And may it be said of us, as it is of them, *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.*

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