



How should we understand the Bible?

by Katherine Harms

What is the Bible all about? How do we learn what we need to learn from the Bible? Why do people say that studying the Bible will change a person's life?

These questions are important. As a Lutheran, I hold fast to the principles that

1. we are justified by faith, and
2. we live in relationship with Christ.

Therefore, I expect that when I read the Bible my faith will increase and my relationship with Christ will mature. There is a long history of Christian experience that bears out the validity of my expectations.

Blaise Pascal lived and wrote in the seventeenth century. In his book, *Les Pensees*, in a chapter entitled "The Fundamentals of the Christian Religion" Pascal says,

The Christian religion, then, teaches men these two truths; that there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him. It is equally important to men to know both these points; and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it. The knowledge of only one of these points gives rise either to the pride of philosophers, who have known God, and not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of atheists, who know their own wretchedness, but not the Redeemer.

and later he says,

We can, then, have an excellent knowledge of God without that of our own wretchedness and of our own

wretchedness without that of God. But we cannot know Jesus Christ without knowing at the same time both God and our own wretchedness. (Quotation from *Les Pensees* by Blaise Pascal, the Gutenberg project, E-book # 18269)

Notice how he consistently talks about “knowing” Christ, not “knowing about” Christ. It is the Bible that teaches us to know Jesus, and we know him best in the person of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In the Bible, we see the unique identity of Christ as both God and man, as infinite and finite, as both eternal and time-constrained, as the alpha and omega of our faith. To read the Bible is not the same thing as knowing Christ, but it is the most profound means by which we discover and grow in that relationship. We are guided in this process by a lifelong conversation with the Holy Spirit who guides us, as Jesus promised, into truth.

Pope Benedict XVI said, in his book *God and the World*

“...An “adult” faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth.” as quoted by The anchoress at <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/theanchoress/>. Again, this relationship can best be informed and nurtured by faithful Bible study.

The Anchoress is a blogger for whom I have learned great respect. Her denominational connection is Roman Catholic, but her faith connection is the Lord Jesus Christ. She is faithful in pointing her readers to Him more than to herself. I respect that. In one of her blogs about our relationships with God and people, she pointed out that “in relationships one is answerable to another.” People with strong marriages and good friendships

know how this works out. Each is answerable to the other, yet each respects the other. Each speaks truth, yet all the words are tempered with love. Our relationship with the Lord cannot actually call him to account to us for anything, yet in that relationship he draws us near to learn more about why and how and what he is doing in the world.

As you approach Bible study, this is a good question for thought: *What is the difference between living **like** Christ and living **in relationship** with Christ?*

Get out your Bible now, and look up the texts below. Do you agree with my analysis?

Jeremiah 9:23-24 says that relationship is what God wants.

Romans 2:25-29 reiterates that God has always wanted a relationship with people.

Romans 9:30-33 points out that Israel always believed that its salvation lay in works, while God constantly tried to teach them that relationship with him through faith was more important than all their works.

Ephesians 2:8-10 teaches that salvation comes by way of God's gift of faith, and it **leads** to good works rather than being the **consequence** of good works. In fact, the good works are intended to be our way of life, and they are to point others to God, as Jesus said in Matthew 5:16

As you read these texts, you will observe that physical circumcision is a legal compliance. Circumcision of the heart is the compliance of relationship. The major difference between those two concepts is the temptation of legalism. Understanding that God wants a relationship with us is crucial to understanding

the Bible. The Law reveals God and his standards in a way that is designed to help us grow if we understand Law in the context of relationship. The Law beats us down and defeats us and can even lead us to despair if we view it like lawyers. Only in relationship with Christ are we able to learn from the Law and be nourished by it.

Legalism is the sin of the Pharisees that Jesus regularly criticized. The Pharisees actually believed that they could perfectly keep the Law and that in so doing they would earn God’s respect. They were trying to make points with God and win him over. They were not trying to know him, as he wished when he walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden. Pharisaism is ego-centric and manipulative. Relationship is self-effacing and mutual. Many people study the Bible as if it were simply the rules for living. The table below compares Bible study in the context of legalism with Bible study in the context of a relationship with Christ.

<p>Legalism makes lists and standards that, if achievable, represent perfection. The Pharisees extracted more than 600 laws from the Torah, and they believed that people could and should obey all those rules. Jesus repeatedly accused the Pharisees of setting themselves equal to God based on their compliance with the laws</p>	<p>Relationship acknowledges that we are completely incapable of “measuring up” to Christ</p>
<p>Legalism allows us to judge ourselves and others as if we were in place of God When Jesus talked about the</p>	<p>Relationship discourages judgment, because we are building relationships with Christ and with other people</p>

<p>prayers of the Pharisee and the publican in the temple, he pointed out this attitude</p>	
<p>Legalism tempts us to compete in the “goodness marathon” Again the prayer of the publican and the Pharisee point up this problem. Jesus mentioned it also when he accused the Pharisees of being whited sepulchers—shiny on the outside and rotten on the inside</p>	<p>Relationship is always about obedience to Christ, not competition with others to win more praise than others</p>
<p>Legalism promotes exclusion of those who do not measure up The Pharisees were always asking why Jesus ate with sinners</p>	<p>Relationship invites everyone to come into fellowship with Christ, recognizing all of us fall short and none of us is good enough’</p>
<p>Legalism destroys freedom, creativity, and delight in our salvation Nobody could discover God’s gifts and grow in relationship when bogged down with all the rules. Nobody could become what God created him/her to be under such a life view.</p>	<p>Relationship promotes freedom, creativity and delight in our salvation</p>

When we read the Bible in order to learn what the law says, we are looking for the way to become perfect. The whole point of the law, as Paul teaches us, is to show us that we can never be perfect. It is meant to frustrate us.

When we study the Bible in order to grow and mature in our relationship with Christ, the relationship informs us as we read. The indwelling Spirit enlightens our reading and shows us Truth, not just facts. Reading the Bible in order to know God more richly changes everything.

There are many techniques for studying the Bible. Each person must find the way that works. We must always remember that everyone is different, and that is the way God intended it. Not every person wants to be a Bible scholar, but every person needs to know God. Each person must find a way to read that fits his own personality, his own curiosity, but most of all his own nourishment. In my Bible study guides I will share with you a few methods of Bible study that have blessed me.

One of the most storied twentieth century martyrs of the faith, Dr. Bill Wallace, who died at the hands of the Chinese communists in 1951, spent only ten or fifteen minutes a day in prayer and Bible reading. Luther, on the other hand, said that the busier his day, the more time he needed in prayer and Bible study. God created each person unique, an individual like no other on earth. We can all learn from each other, but each of us must let the Holy Spirit lead us into the discipline that is right for us.



© 2009 Katherine Harms
www.katherineharms.com